TRAILBLAZER: PM MODI HAS SHOWN DETERMINATION TO USHER IN SAFFRON DIPPED *BHARAT* 20

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UNION BUDGET 2022-2023

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VISIT…

EXCELLENCE, LIKE COURAGE, CAN BECOME A HABIT

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Editor's Note

The Chinese challenge and the Galwan truth!

THE WHITE HOUSE in its Indo-Pacific strategic report has stated that "India faces significant geopolitical challenges from China and its behaviour on the Line of Actual Control". Expressing concerns over the malign Chinese role in the region, the first region-specific report released by US President Joe Biden-led administration says that it has had a galvanizing impact on India because China is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might to become the world's most influential power. The report chides China, saying that the People's Republic of China has been undermining human rights and international law, including freedom of navigation, as well as other principles that bring stability and prosperity to the region. The result is that China's aggression is driving India closer to Washington.

However, China has always been at its nefarious designs and its decision to make a regimental commander, who was injured in the Galwan clash, a torchbearer for the Beijing Winter Olympics, to say the least, was disturbing. The said officer was part of the military command that attacked India and was involved in genocide against the Uyghurs. This came close on the heels of the alleged abduction and torture of a 17-year-old from Arunachal Pradesh by Chinese forces. In Lok Sabha, the Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan admitted in a written reply that China continues to be in illegal occupation of approximately 38,000 square km of Indian territory in the Union Territory of Ladakh for the last six decades. A bridge is being constructed in areas that have continued to be under the illegal occupation of China. Significantly, the External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said that the tense situation at the Line of Actual Control was due to the disregard of written agreements by China not to amass soldiers at the border.

Beijing is already in a tight spot in view of the findings of a year-long investigation "Galwan Decoded" by a group of social media researchers that China's casualties in the June 2020 Galwan valley border clash with India were much higher than the official figures. This offsets the growing power and expansionist activities of China. In fact the People's Liberation Army has to cut a sorry figure because as against the count of just four fatalities, a report in an Australian newspaper says at least 38 Chinese soldiers drowned while crossing a fast-flowing river in sub-zero temperatures in darkness. It says that a lot of facts about what really happened had been hidden by Beijing and mostly fabricated stories were told to the world. Earlier a Russian news agency had revealed 45 fatalities on the Chinese side. India had announced it had lost 20 soldiers and honoured some with gallantry medals but the PLA accepted only four deaths and that too much later. Indeed history cannot be distorted and heroes cannot be forgotten.

CHARANJIT AHUJA

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Since the Budget merger, the Railway's focus on the poor and the disadvantaged has diminished

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FEBUARY 15, 2022
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BATTLEGROUND UTTAR PRADESH
A LITMUS TEST FOR BJP
Despite various surveys predicting easy win for the BJP, ground realities indicate UP will be far from a smooth sailing for the saffron party

DESERTIONS DO NOT AUGUR WELL FOR BJP

With reference to the cover story "Battleground Uttar Pradesh: A litmus test for BJP" by Mudit Mathur (Feb 15)

For the ruling BJP in Uttar Pradesh, a spate of political desertions tell a tale. The exodus of BJP MLAs and ministers belonging to the OBC and SC category in UP at this critical juncture does not augur well for the party's electoral fortunes.

It is not easy for the Yogi-led Uttar Pradesh government to ward off the anti-incumbency factor, in view of the growing alienation among a major section of farming community and Muslims.

The BJP could face a tough time as the Samajwadi Party seems to be rising. Let us see if Congress can fare better than last time.

NGR PRASAD

Odds stacked heavily against Yogi govt

With reference to the cover story "Battleground Uttar Pradesh: A litmus test for BJP" by Mudit Mathur (Feb 15)

The elections in UP usually witness politics of appeasement and polarisation, involving caste, religion, region, and nationalism. Political parties have conveniently intertwined religion, nationalism and casteism to make them tools for ascendancy to power.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has nothing significant to brag about in his report card of achievements, except invoking UAPA and the Sedition Act against protesters.

Quite a few MLAs were in a rebellious mood a few months ago, thanks to Yogi's haughty attitude. As of now, the odds seem to be stacked against him.

KAKOLI DAS

All parties are resorting to opportunistic politics as the elections scenario heats up in Uttar Pradesh. When among Hindus, they talk of Hindu gods and deities and make sure that they visit temples and are seen posing with relevant insignia. When among Muslims, they make lofty promises to appease them. Ideologies have been consigned to the bin.

Then there is the great caste conundrum. There are myriad castes and sub-castes, each of which has leaders with unbridled political ambitions. They also vie for their pound of political flesh. The real issues besetting the electorate like employment, health services, and roads have been put on the backburner.

Each party is accusing the other of dividing society, though all seem to be doing so. And while all this is happening, media never cares to rake up the real issues with its eyes firmly fixed on TRP. No one talks of social harmony or national integrity.

VIDUSHI

Samajwadi Party finally coming into its own

The BJP harped on hate-mongering and a divisive agenda to garner votes in the 2017 UP elections. As the party gears up for its critical electoral fight against the SP, it seems to be in a tight corner because political polarisation is not likely to gain traction. The spate of resignations and defections of senior leaders who switched over to SP may also cost it dear.

Moreover, the SP seems to be coming into its own by reviving its alliance with the RLD and desperately wooing the Muslims, SCs and backward classes. People are venting their ire on rising unemployment, inflation and insensitive handling of the farmers' year-long agitation against the Centre's farm laws.

What people want is change for the better, peace, social harmony and inclusive development.

SUNIL DEV

Both the flames could have co-existed

With reference to the report "A course correction: Destroying to build?" by Kumkum Chadha (Feb 15)

The Amar Jawan Jyoti is extinguished and the symbol of unknown soldiers — a helmet and an SLR rifle — will be removed from the canopy to make way for Netaji's statue.

In my view, both flames could have co-existed as the standalone icons of our glorious past, signifying the grit and the valour of our veer jawans across different time frames. The Amar Jawan Jyoti memorial, with an eternal flame, has always held deep memories of our past, colonial included.

Belittling, erasing history and carving new narratives to suit its political and religious ideology are tools the ruling party is em-

ploying to polarise the electorate for narrow political gains.

S KAMAT

The government has rightly merged the Amar Jawan Jyoti at the adjoining NWM in recognition of the Fallen Soldier. Anybody visiting the memorial can spend two minutes in silent homage there.

his acknowledgement of sacrifice and the laying down of lives by the soldiers in the defence of their country is beyond political considerations and controversies.

KARAN SOOD

Hidutva forces trying to usurp Bose's legacy

It is true that post Independence, the Congress abandoned Subhash Chandra Bose. He did not approve of the Gandhian method to free India.

But now the BJP has adopted him to exploit his name for political gains. The Hindutva forces are trying to prove that he was one of their own. In a republic, the supreme power is held by the people and their elected representatives.

But it seems that the supreme power lies with politicians who can make or mar the destiny of the people in accordance with their whims. People are remembered only during elections. Bose was a proponent of secularism and should be treated so without giving him any political colour.

VIJAY SINGH ADHIKARI

Govt should clear the air on Pegasus controversy

With reference to the report "A new report reignites Pegasus snoopgate controversy" by Anil Manocha (Feb 15)

With regard to Pegasus controversy, there is no denying the fact that the Government of India owes an explanation to the nation with regard to the latest NYT Pegasus revelation. Now it is clear that the GOI procured the spying software and must have used it for spying on political adversaries. The present BJP government believes that whatever it articulates will be lapped up by the masses, whereas whoever is critical of the government is branded anti-national element.

BALJIT SANDHU

Govt should rescue apple growing farmers

With reference to the report "Why Iranian apple import is driving orchardists up the wall?" by Raj Machhan (Feb 15)

The government should take effective steps to ensure the survival of people of apple-growing hill states, who, especially the old and the ailing, are also forced to live a tough life due to rough terrain.

The PM is repeatedly making a case for 'Vocal for local' and advocates the promotion of local products. So it is the duty of the government to frame the regulations accordingly to save the livelihood of apple growers. Consumers should also prefer to buy local fruits and vegetables.

N.K. SHARMA

It is matter of concern that huge quantities of Iranian apples are flooding the domestic markets which is harming the interests of domestic farmers in Himachal and J&K.

As per the word of mouth, the imported apples look and taste much better than Indian apples. The policy of the Central government to allow the Iranian apple in local markets has ruined the dreams of Indian apple growers.

The government should not allow the import at the cost of local producers. The farmers in India should adopt the latest technology to grow, pack and store the product to become competitive.

ARUN GUPTA

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Arrest of scribes further chokes press freedom in Kashmir

The arrest the Fahad Shah, editor of an online news portal, Kashmir Walla, close on the heels of the detention of a reporter associated with same portal has caused unease among the journalist fraternity in the Valley, reports **RIAZ WANI**

On February 4, J&K police arrested the editor of an online news portal, Fahad Shah. Though the portal's content over the last two years hasn't been to the liking of the government, it had appeared unlikely that Shah would be arrested. Earlier Shah had been summoned to the police stations several times but let off.

Jammu and Kashmir Police, in a statement, claimed that Shah had been identified among "some Facebook users and [news] portals" that had published "anti-national content."

Earlier, police arrested Sajad Gul, a reporter associated with Kashmir Walla, Fahad's portal. Though he was immediately granted bail by the court, police later booked him under the stringent Public Safety Act which allows the detention of an individual without trial for six months and shifted to jail outside Kashmir Valley.

In a separate incident, journalist Gowhar Geelani has also been summoned by the executive magistrate of Shopian district to appear in court on February 7 for 'acting in a manner prejudicial to public interest'.

The successive arrest of two journalists has created a deep unease among the journalist fraternity in the Valley. Rumors are flying thick and fast about the impending arrest of more journalists.

The arrests have been slammed by Kashmiri politicians and journalist bodies.

"Standing up for the truth is deemed anti-national. Showing the mirror to a deeply intolerant & authoritarian government is also anti-national. Fahad's journalistic work speaks for itself & depicts the ground reality unpalatable to GOI. How many Fahads will you arrest?," former J&K Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti tweeted.

"The arrest of Fahad Shah shows Jammu and Kashmir authorities' utter disregard for press freedom and the fundamental right of journalists to report freely and safely," said Steven Butler, CPJ's Asia program coordinator, in Washington, D.C. "Authorities must immediately release Shah, and all other journalists behind bars, and cease detaining and harassing journalists for simply doing their jobs."

Even the Editors' Guild of India has condemned the arrest of Fahad. "The Guild also demands immediate release of Fahad Shah as well as Sajad Gul, and to ensure that FIRs under harsh penal laws, intimidatory questioning, and wrongful detainment are not used as tools for suppressing journalists' rights," it said.

The arrests followed immediately after the closure of Kashmir Press Club. This happened after a group of journalists stormed the Kashmir Press Club on January 15, accompanied by a posse of policemen, and announced themselves as the interim body of the club.

But there was soon massive backlash against the decision with almost all journalist organizations registered with the club resisting "the arbitrary move".

Later, the J&K administration put on hold the re-registration of the Club and took control of the premises, citing a "potential law and order situation."

The government has already stopped advertisements to several local newspapers, even though no formal orders have been issued to this effect. This has come as a crippling blow to the papers already reeling from a denial of central government adverts. More so, in the case of Greater Kashmir, one of J&K's largest newspapers. Similarly, ads have been withheld to other major newspapers like Kashmir Reader, Kashmir Life and Kashmir Images.

Considering that the government is further tightening the noose against the press in Kashmir, it is unlikely that the press in Kashmir will have enough freedom to report the ground situation in the near future.

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Railways gives wide berth to social responsibility

During the last five years that the railway budget has been integrated with the general budget, Indian Railways has drifted from its usual norms with little focus on general public. Sops for the poor and disadvantaged segments of people have gone missing, reports **M.Y. SIDDIQUI**

Railways annual budget bifurcated from the general budget since 1924-25 has ensured dedicated sustained growth and expansion of Indian Railways to provide efficient bulk passenger and freight rail services to the nation.

Reasons for a separate annual rail budget included railways' need for focused attention for its expansion and modernization as it is a heavy capital intensive enterprise subject to high depreciation, corrosion and rusting, which without special attention will be overlooked and lose its sheen bereft of public and media scrutiny. It was also reasoned that the railways would always require government support to sustain itself. Private investors will be wary to invest in this heavy capital-intensive entity, as people of India have witnessed that no private investors would invest in railways despite various sops provided by the successive union governments since globalization of Indian economy commenced in 1991.

Private investors are solely guided by profits, which is not that easy in railways because of long gestation period between investments and fructification of that in profits. Continued pursuit for private investments since has come a cropper. Only, profitable subsidiaries like IRCTC, IRCON, IRFC and CONCOR have been offloaded partly to the private enterprises in keeping with the professed policy of this regime to privatize profit-making public enterprises.

Suresh Prabhu was the last Railway Minister to present railway budget in 2016-17 and Arun Jaitly was the first Finance Minister to present in 2017combined union budget that integrated railways budget with the general budget for the financial year 2017-18. Union budget 2022-23 presented by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on February 1, 2022 in Parliament is the sixth combined union budget. During the last five years that the railway budget has been integrated with the general budget, Indian Railways has drifted from its usual norms with little focus on general public. Also missing is the special emphasis on expansion of rail lines in hitherto untouched areas like rural, backward and terraneous ones to provide right engine of growth in such areas for their all-round development. In addition, focus earlier used to be on passenger amenities including sops for the poor and disadvantaged segments of people considered as part of railways' social responsibility.

During the last five years since 2017, railways focus is on profits over the politics. Other emphasis includes shifting proposals for expansion of rail lines in constituencies of MPs of ruling RSS Pariwar. Introduction of new trains, extension of trains to longer destinations, increase in frequency of trains, passenger amenities like new halts, improved catering services, cleanliness, modernization of stations, tariff hikes etc. have taken away from the privileges of Parliament and entrusted to the Railway Board.

Result has been massive hike in passenger and freight fare, unprecedented hike in platform tickets and withdrawal of subsidy to deserving segments in tickets' concessions, quietly under the veil of secrecy. All these are happening without public glare and quietly in Rail Bhawan usurping the privileges of

Parliament.

Under the current regime, railways is viewed as corporate behemoth bereft of its social responsibility that used to balance rail services by cross subsidizing passenger services with profit earnings from freight earnings. As a result, 18,700 kms of new lines, pending execution for long time, are frozen, not abandoned. They are kept alive in the pink book (work book). Of this, work on 800 km of lines is underway suiting the interests of the ruling RSS Pariwar. Current regime also abolished Rail Users Consultative Machinery at Divisional, Zonal and Ministry levels. Inputs from such periodic meetings used to benefit rail users as they were considered in the annual rail budget. Integration of rail budget with general budget followed the recommendations of a committee on railway reforms headed by economist Bibek Debroy, a member of NITI Ayog, the successor of Planning Commission.

In the first combined budget in 2017, major areas of passenger safety, capital and development works, cleanliness, finance and accounting reforms were announced. Listing of railway subsidiaries, IRCTC, IRCON and IRFC in bourses were also announced. In budget 2018, the outlay of railways was increased to 1.48 lakh crore from 1.43 crore in 2017 budget. It included capacity creation, track renewal, doubling, redevelopment of 600 stations and gauge conversion. Development of world-class trains with Train 18 and Train 20 with Wi-Fi, CCTVs across trains and stations were also announced. In 2019, allocation was increased to Rs 1.6 lakh crore. Downsizing of Railway Board from eight to five members was also announced.

In 2020, focus was on private sector for operating trains and redeveloping stations. It was also announced that more Tejas Express-style would be introduced on major tourism routes with 150 private trains within three years on the network. During 2021, railways was allocated Rs.1,10,055 crore, out of which Rs.1,07,100 crore was for capital expenditure. There was a proposal for taking up 263.7-km long Sonnagar-Gomoh section of the Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor (DFC) in the PPP (Public-Private-Partnership) model. New DFC routes, East Coast, East-West, and North-South were also proposed. In the budget 2022-23 announced on February 1, 2022, allocation for railways is Rs.1,40,367.13 crore that included seven engines (multi-model transportation) growth to boost the Atmanirbhar dream including 400 Vande Bharat trains, all-aluminum built high-speed lightweight coaches, envisioned by the abolished Planning Commission in the 12th Five Year Plan as a pilot project.

It is considered a good move to provide higher allocation in railway infrastructure to drive growth of the national economy. However, negative aspect of this is that interest burden of all the investments that Indian Railways started making since 2015 by borrowings will start impacting adversely in coming years after the initial moratorium ends. With OR already so high, this could put the railways in a further debt trap in the near future. Current debt burden on railways is of over 7 lakh crore. This did not receive focus in the budget for 2022-23. Added to this, worldwide cost of logistics and transportation is 6-8 per cent of the value of goods moved, whereas on Indian Railways it is 14 per cent, which has not been addressed in the budget. However, it is learnt that the railways intend to bring it down to 11 per cent. Yet another problem of the railways is that there is no cost benefit analysis post the completion of development projects like new lines, 100 per cent electrification, modernization of stations etc. In the low-density traffic, low revenue from freight and passenger earnings is a drain on its financial health.

Merger of rail budget with the general budget is detrimental to the public interests in general as allocation for railways are noticed obscurely in the media without detailed comprehensive analysis and evaluation. People as their democratic rights are deprived of the detailed right information about what the government was doing for them regarding further passenger amenities, expansion of rail network and services in their respective areas, introduction of new trains, etc.

It is mischievous that within the four walls of Rail Bhawan quietly, the government increases fair and freight rates, curtails rail services arbitrarily with no media and for that matter public glare on their decisions. MPs, political leaders, civil society activists, social workers, NGOs, other needy used to flock to the Ministry for help in different matters from railways as now all such matters are directly dealt with there. Earlier, policy matters were unfolded in and approval of Parliament taken amidst intensive discussions including overnight ones to satisfy MPs. Now, there is scant public and media scrutiny of the railways, which bodes ill for democracy and accountability to the people.

Currently, Indian Railways is jostling with private entry to offer competition and better services, accounting reforms to ensure costs and profitability numbers are transparent, establishing an independent regulator, devolution of decision making, away from a centralized structure in Rail Bhawan. National Monetisation Pipeline also has asset monetization plan for Indian Railways and there are plans for corporatization of Railway Production Units.

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UNION BUDGET 2022-2023

THOUGHTFUL POLICY AGENDA OR BETRAYAL?

In a refreshing break from the past, the govt chooses to eschew populism ahead of Assembly polls. But has the FM done enough to kickstart the pandemic-hit economy? A report by BHARAT HITESHI

The much-hyped general budget is over and rightly it has avoided populism ahead of assembly elections and this is refreshing as it is a deviation from the past as budgets had more populism, big ticket announcements and less substance.

At 'Aatmanirbhar Arthvyavastha' event, Prime Minister, Narendra Modi termed Budget 2022 as a step towards a modern and self-reliant India. He observed that the Budget proposes to make a four-fold increase in public investments as compared to those in the UPA regime and that the measure will open up immense opportunities hailing the Union Budget as "people-friendly" and "progressive". However, participating on the Motion of Thanks on the President's Address in the Rajya Sabha, former PM Gowda observed that the allocation for agriculture in 2022-23 was reduced by 3.8 per cent as compared to the last fiscal noting that "India's economy is based on agriculture that involves 50 per cent of the workforce of the country and contributes 70 per cent to the GDP". He said the President's Address was bereft of a road map to double farmers' income. "Despite all odds such as climate change, flood, drought and declining groundwater level, farmers of the country produced 305 million tonnes of food grain and 320 million tonnes of fruits and vegetables in 2020-21 with an average growth of 2.3 per cent," he said. He also referred to the reduction in budgetary allocation for the MGNREGA noting that "This is contrary to the goal of rural development".

The International Monetary Fund has found the Union budget presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman as a very "thoughtful policy agenda" for India while opposition Congress has termed the Union Budget 2022-23 announced as a "betrayal of India's salaried and middle class". At the same time, former Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda has said that reduction in the budgetary allocation for the agriculture sector was disappointing.

IMF GIVES A THUMBS UP

Significantly, the International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva had a word of praise for the Budget, "We have been projecting quite a robust growth for India. Yes, there is a small downgrade versus our previous projection from 9.5

per cent to 9 per cent for 2022". We also have a small upgrade for 2023, because we think that we will see a stable growth not very different from (those projected by) the (Union) Minister of Finance," Georgieva said during a virtual round table with a group of reporters. "We are very positive on the fact that India is thinking of addressing short-term issues, but also long-term structural transformation, and that there is a great deal of emphasis placed on innovation on research and development on human capital investment and digitalization, as well as thinking of how India can accelerate the climate change agenda using economic instruments for that," Georgieva said.

Union Minister for Finance and Corporate Affairs Nirmala Sitharaman while presenting the Union Budget in Parliament pointed out that India's economic growth in the current year is estimated to be 9.2 per cent, highest among all large economies. The overall, sharp rebound and recovery of the economy from the adverse effects of the pandemic is reflective of our country's strong resilience.

However, Senior Jounalist K R Sudhaman, who has 40 years experience in journalism and has been editor in Press Trust of India, TickerNews and Financial Chronicle writing for IPA questions if the budget has done enough to kick-start the economy? And answers that the answer is not clear yet. This is because world over, the management of the economy is largely driven by the idea of dealing with crisis and how to manage and tackle crisis rather than bringing about long-term stability to the economy.

There are no doubt ups and downs in any economy due to business cycles and unforeseen developments like the recent Covid pandemic. So as a result of the effort, world over, particularly in democracies, the attempt is to tackle only immediate problems and that too quickly. As a result there is a tendency to opt for quick-fix solutions, which are painless, by adopting expansionist and contractionist fiscal and monetary policies resulting in the economy being always in the state of flux.

It is time economists ponder over this matter and attempt to move towards a stable economic situation irrespective of the emerging situation. In the case of India the only time long lasting economic reforms were attempted was in 1991 when the economy faced a major crisis, forcing the government to come out with such policies that worked for long-term good of the economy. It was not only P V Narasimha Rao, who started it, but also continued by his successors, Deve Gowda, I K Gujral and Atal Behari Vajpayee. In fact Manmohan Singh, who was the main architect of 1991 reform as finance minister, could not carry forward reforms with the same zeal as Prime Minister, partly due to compulsions of coalition politics and his inability to manage the Political economy like Narasimha Rao or Vajpayee.

Even Deve Gowda and Gujral were able to carry forward reforms much better. In fact P Chidambaram's dream budget with far-reaching tax reforms were presented and passed during their short regime. These reforms were possible despite a coalition government or minority government because there was a consensus among all political parties to carry forward reforms during the 10 odd years since 1991.

So what is important is proper management of the political economy. This is critical for ensuring sound and stable economic policies. This ensures macro-economic fundamentals are strong to weather the ups and downs of business cycles and unforeseen crises. The questions therefore are we moving towards that the answer is a certain no as world over economists do not think long-term. As Maynard Keynes once said during the great depression of the 1930s that in the long term "we are all dead". That is true, but if we have to take care of subsequent generations, there has to be a long term stability. Hence policies have to be evolved to ensure that long term issues are addressed even while short-term economic issues are dealt with for immediate solutions.

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman while presenting the Union Budget pointed out that India's economic growth in the current year is estimated to be 9.2 per cent, highest among all large economies

Former RBI Governor and economist Raghuram Rajan is right when he says one of the reasons why emerging markets have swung from crisis to crisis is that they failed to achieve consensus among political parties to establish and back mechanisms irrespective of

their own immediate political priorities. Recent History shows that developed economies, too, are becoming less tolerant of pain, because their own political consensus has eroded. In the past, advanced economies created mechanisms that allowed them to make hard choices when necessary and that included independent central banks and mandated limits on budget deficits. That is given a go by even in advanced economies now.

Elaborating, Rajan says in an article that financial markets have become volatile once again, owing to fears that the US Federal Reserve will have to tighten its monetary policy significantly to control inflation. But many investors still hope that the Fed will go easy if asset prices start to fall substantially. If the Fed proves them right, it will become that much harder to normalize financial conditions in the future. Investor's hope that the Fed will prolong the party is not baseless, he said citing in late 1996, Fed chair Alan Greenspan warned of financial markets' irrational exuberance. But the markets shrugged off the warning and were proved correct. Perhaps chastened by the harsh political reaction to Greenspan's speech, the Fed did nothing. And when the stock market eventually crashed in 2000, the Fed cut rates, ensuring that the recession was mild.

As Manmohan Singh and Rajan say there are no free lunches. It is true any free lunch comes with a cost and it is time that both central and state governments shun freebies and populist measures to get votes rather than focusing permanent well-being of the economy. This has resulted in perpetual macroeconomic instability both in advanced and emerging economies for short-term benefits. It is time economists and politicians ponder over this matter and take steps to work towards stable economies world over so that nations do not move over from crisis to crisis. Some decisions will have to be painful so that economies, particularly India,

do not move towards high fiscal deficits, high debt and runaway inflation.

PLI TO CREATE 60 LAKH NEW JOBS

The Finance Minister informed that the Productivity Linked Incentive (PLI) in 14 sectors for achieving the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat has received excellent response, with potential to create 60 lakh new jobs, and an additional production of Rs 30 lakh crore during next 5 years. Dwelling on the issue of implementation of the new Public Sector Enterprise policy, she said the

The Finance Minister informed that the Productivity Linked Incentive (PLI) in 14 sectors for achieving the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat has received excellent response, with potential to create 60 lakh new jobs

strategic transfer of ownership of Air India has been completed, the strategic partner for NINL (Neelanchal Ispat Nigam Limited) has been selected, the public issue of the LIC is expected shortly and others too are in the process for 2022-23.

She emphasized that this Budget continues to provide impetus for growth. It lays a parallel track of (1) a blueprint for the "Amrit Kaal", which is futuristic and inclusive, which will directly benefit our youth, women, farmers, the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. And (2) big public investment for modern infrastructure, readying for India at 100 and this shall be guided by PM GatiShakti and be benefited by the synergy of multi-modal approach. GatiShakti, is driven by seven engines, namely, Roads, Railways, Airports, Ports,

Mass Transport, Waterways, and Logistics Infrastructure. All seven engines will pull forward the economy in unison. The PM GatiShakti Master Plan for

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- India's economic growth is estimated at 9.2% to be the highest among all large economies.
- 60 lakh new jobs to be created under the productivity linked incentive scheme in 14 sectors.
- Entering Amrit Kaal, the 25 year long lead up to India @100, the budget provides impetus for growth.
- The scope of PM GatiShakti National Master Plan will encompass the seven engines for economic transformation, seamless multimodal connectivity and logistics efficiency.
- National Highways Network to be expanded by 25000 Km in 2022-23.
- Contracts to be awarded through PPP mode in 2022-23 for implementation of Multimodal Logistics Parks at four locations.
- One Station One Product concept to help local businesses & supply chains.
- 400 new generation Vande Bharat Trains to be manufactured during the next three years.
- National Ropeways Development Program, Parvatmala to be taken up on PPP mode.
- Rs 2.37 lakh crore direct payment to 1.63 crore farmers for procurement of wheat and paddy.
- 'Kisan Drones' for crop assessment, digitization of land records, spraying of insecticides and nutrients.
- 130 lakh MSMEs provided additional credit under Emergency Credit Linked Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS).
- Startups will be promoted to facilitate 'Drone Shakti' and for Drone-As-A-Service (DrAAS).
- 'One class-One TV channel' programme of PM eVIDYA to be expanded to 200 TV channels.

Expressways will be formulated in 2022-23 to facilitate faster movement of people and goods. The National Highways network will be expanded by 25,000 km in 2022-23 and Rs 20,000 crore will be mobilized through innovative ways of financing to complement the public resources.

In Railways, the Finance Minister said that 'One Station-One Product' concept will be popularized to help local businesses & supply chains. Moreover, as a part of Atmanirbhar Bharat, 2,000 km of network will be brought under Kavach, the indigenous world-class technology for safety and capacity augmentation in 2022-23. She also informed that four hundred new-generation Vande Bharat Trains with better energy efficiency and riding experience will be developed and manufactured and one hundred PM GatiShakti Cargo Terminals for multimodal logistics facilities will be set up during the next three years.

There is Budget announcement that the Government proposes to conduct the "required spectrum auctions" in 2022 to facilitate the roll-out of 5G mobile phone services in fiscal 2022-23. It is sure to trigger speculation including about the feasibility of the timeline. The Government's keenness to expedite the roll-out was framed by Sitharaman as being propelled by an appreciation of the latest generation telecommunication technology's ability to serve as an enabler of economic growth and job creation.

The TRAI is expected to submit its recommendations on the spectrum to be set aside for 5G by March. However, there is little clarity on the approach the Government plans to take with regard to the crucial issues surrounding the introduction of 5G services.

Foremost are questions around the particular frequencies the regulator is likely to recommend, the Government's plans on pricing the spectrum, and most crucially, the very viability of the new technology, both for the telecom companies and the economy as a whole. The private telecom service providers are already under financial stress.

That 5G represents an exponential leap in technology is beyond doubt. However, most countries that have commercialized 5G so far largely find the technology still predominantly deployed as an upgraded replacement for 4G in terms of end use, with the industrial and public utility applications envisaged still at least a few years away.

On Agriculture front, the Finance Minister informed that Chemical-free Natural Farming will be promoted throughout the country, with a focus on farmers' lands in 5-km wide corridors along river Ganga, at the first stage. Use of 'Kisan Drones' will be promoted for crop assessment, digitization of land records, spraying of insecticides, and nutrients. She said, to reduce dependence on import of oilseeds, a rationalised and comprehensive scheme to increase domestic production of oilseeds will be implemented.

As 2023 has been announced as the International Year of Millets, the government announced full support for post-harvest value addition, enhancing domestic consumption, and for branding millet products nationally and internationally.

ECLGS TO SOFTEN PANDEMIC BLOW

The Finance Minister underlined that the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) has provided much-needed additional credit to more than 130 lakh MSMEs to help them mitigate the adverse impact of the pandemic. She, however added that the hospitality and related services, especially those by micro and small enterprises, are yet to regain their pre-pandemic level of business and after considering these aspects, the ECLGS will be extended up to March 2023. She informed that its guarantee cover will be expanded by Rs 50,000 crore to total cover of Rs 5 lakh crore, with the additional amount being earmarked exclusively for the hospitality and related enterprises.

Similarly, Credit Guarantee Trust for Micro and Small Enterprises (CGTMSE) scheme will be revamped with required infusion of funds. This will facilitate additional credit of Rs 2 lakh crore for Micro and Small Enterprises and expand employment opportunities. She informed that Raising and Accelerating MSME Performance (RAMP) programme with outlay of Rs 6,000 crore over 5 years will be rolled out to make the MSME sector more resilient, competitive and efficient. Udyam, e-Shram, NCS and ASEEM portals will be interlinked and their scope will be widened.

- An open platform for National Digital Health Ecosystem to be rolled out.
- Rs. 48,000 crore allocated for completion of 80 lakh houses in 2022-23 under PM Awas Yojana.
- New scheme PM-DevINE launched to fund infrastructure and social development projects in the North-East.
- Vibrant Villages Programme for development of Border villages with sparse population, limited connectivity and infrastructure on the northern border.
- 100 per cent of 1.5 lakh post offices to come on the core banking system.
- e-Passports with embedded chip and futuristic technology to be rolled out.
- Unique Land Parcel Identification Number for IT-based management of land records.
- Scheme for design-led manufacturing to be launched to build a strong ecosystem for 5G as part of the Production Linked Incentive Scheme.
- Special Economic Zones Act to be replaced with a new legislation to enable States to become partners in 'Development of Enterprise and Service Hubs'.
- 68% of capital procurement budget earmarked for domestic industry in 2022-23, up from 58% in 2021-22.

A Digital University will be established to provide access to students across the country for world-class quality universal education with personalised learning experience at their doorsteps. This will be made available in different Indian languages and ICT formats. The University will be built on a networked hub-spoke model, with the hub building cutting edge ICT expertise. The best public universities and institutions in the country will collaborate as a network of hub-spokes. Under Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission, an open platform for the National Digital Health Ecosystem will be rolled out and it will consist of digital registries of health providers and health facilities, unique health identity, consent framework, and universal access to health facilities.

Budget has an allocation of Rs 60,000 crore to cover 3.8 crore households in 2022-23 for Har Ghar, Nal Se

Jal. Current coverage is 8.7 crores and of this 5.5 crore households were provided tap water in the last 2 years itself. Similarly, in 2022-23, 80 lakh houses will be completed for the identified eligible beneficiaries of PM Awas Yojana, both rural and urban and Rs 48,000 crore is allocated for this purpose.

In 2022, 100 per cent of 1.5 lakh post offices will come on the core banking system enabling financial inclusion and access to accounts through net banking, mobile banking, ATMs, and also provide online transfer of funds between post office accounts and bank accounts.

This will be helpful, especially for farmers and senior citizens in rural areas, enabling interoperability and financial inclusion. To mark 75 years of independence, the government has proposed to set up 75 Digital Banking Units (DBUs) in 75 districts of the country

The outlays for health care, rural development and NREGS have all shrunk as a percentage of overall expenditure in the Union Budget estimates for fiscal 2023 from the revised estimates for the current year

by Scheduled Commercial Banks to ensure that the benefits of digital banking reach every nook and corner of the country in a consumer-friendly manner. The issuance of e-Passports using embedded chip and futuristic technology will be rolled out in 2022-23 to enhance convenience for the citizens in their overseas travel.

On the Defence front, the Government reiterates its commitment to reducing imports and promoting AtmaNirbharta in equipment for the Armed Forces. Sixty eight per cent of the capital procurement budget will be earmarked for domestic industry in 2022-23, up from 58 per cent in 2021-22. Defence R&D will be opened up for industry, startups and academia with 25 per cent of defence R&D budget earmarked. The Finance Minister stressed that Public investment must continue to take the lead and pump-prime the private investment and demand in 2022-23 and therefore the outlay for capital expenditure in the Union Budget is once again being stepped up sharply by 35.4 per cent from Rs 5.54 lakh crore in the current year to Rs 7.50 lakh crore in 2022-23.

This has increased to more than 2.2 times the expenditure of 2019-20 and this outlay in 2022-23 will be 2.9 per cent of GDP. With this investment taken together with the provision made for creation of capital assets through Grants-in-Aid to States, the 'Effective Capital Expenditure' of the Central Government is estimated at Rs 10.68 lakh crore in 2022-23, which will be about 4.1 per cent of GDP.

As a part of the government's overall market borrowings in 2022-23, sovereign Green Bonds will be issued for mobilizing resources for green infrastructure. The proceeds will be deployed in public sector projects which help in reducing the carbon intensity of the economy. The Government proposed to introduce Digital Rupee, using blockchain and other technologies, to be issued by the Reserve Bank of India starting 2022-23 for a more efficient and cheaper currency management system.

GOVT REPOSES TRUST IN THE TAXPAYERS

The budget proposes a new provision permitting taxpayers to file an Updated Return on payment of additional tax. This updated return can be filed within two years from the end of the relevant assessment year. Sitharaman said that with this proposal, there will be a trust reposed in the taxpayers that will enable the assessee herself to declare the income that she may have missed out earlier while filing her return. It is an affirmative step in the direction of voluntary tax compliance.

The Central Government contributes 14 per cent of the salary of its employees to the National Pension System (NPS) Tier-I. This is allowed as a deduction in computing the income of the employee. However, such deduction is allowed only to the extent of 10 per cent of the salary in case of employees of the State government. To provide equal treatment, the budget proposes to increase the tax deduction limit from 10 per cent to 14 per cent on employer's contribution to the NPS account of State Government employees as well.

In an effort to establish a globally competitive business environment for certain domestic companies, a concessional tax regime of 15 per cent tax was introduced by the government for newly incorporated domestic manufacturing companies. The Union Budget

proposes to extend the last date for commencement of manufacturing or production under section 115BAB till 31st March, 2024.

A final analysis would be that the economy is still in search of "double engine growth" that could help entrench the recovery from the last fiscal year's record contraction. The question that hangs is if FM has missed an opportunity to address major issues through a combination of tax breaks for the middle class and cash handouts for the poor. The Minister herself acknowledges the role public capital expenditure could play. Yet, the Budget outlay of Rs 7.50 lakh-crore for the capital account marks just a 24.4 per cent increase from the revised estimate of Rs 6.03 lakh-crore for the current fiscal. While the broad sweep of the public infrastructure envisioned by the programme could potentially be truly transformative if it were to be executed as imagined, the Budget is largely short on details where it concerns the specifics and pencils in some figures only for the roads and railways components.

The outlays for health care, rural development and national rural employment guarantee scheme have all shrunk as a percentage of overall expenditure in the Budget estimates for fiscal 2023 from the revised estimates for the current year, even if in some cases only marginally. That these sectors have been forced to bear the impact of the Government's keenness to broadly stick to a fiscal consolidation road map — with the Budget projecting a narrowing of the fiscal deficit to 6.4% of GDP in 2022-23, from a revised estimate for 6.9% — reflects on its priorities. Government spending on health care ought to have instead been significantly increased, with the lessons from the ongoing pandemic's first two waves serving to illuminate the need for a sizeable enlargement of the public health infrastructure. The Minister has tried to address the raging debate over how to deal with virtual currencies by adopting a twin-track approach. The RBI-issued Digital Rupee would leverage blockchain and other related technologies. In parallel, she intends to tax income from the transfer

of any virtual digital asset at the rate of 30 per cent, with deduction allowed only for the cost of acquisition.

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COLUMN

SPOTLIGHT

KUMKUM CHADHA

Kumkum is a political journalist known for her no holds barred writings. An author of several books, her latest "The Marigold Story: Indira Gandhi and Others"won critical acclaim. Conferred several awards for fearless writings, Kumkum also served on the National Committee on Jail Reforms

Saffron dipped Bharat is the new order

One cannot take away from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's grit and determination to usher in a naya Bharat. Neither should we overlook his Party's attempts to tell the minorities, particularly the Muslims, that this is not a country that they can call their own.

This year the officials in the Finance Ministry were deprived of eating "halwa". Equally, citizens were bereft of Abide by Me .. at Beating Retreat ceremony, reportedly Mahatma Gandhi's favourite hymn.

On the other hand, saffron invaded the length and breadth of the country: literally from Kashmir to Karnataka.

If BJP went to town over the national flag being unfurled in Srinagar's controversial Lal Chowk, Hindu boys sported saffron scarves to counter Muslim girls wearing hijab in colleges in Karnataka.

This is the sum total of a new India: one which BJP has handcrafted to showcase to its billion plus people. Critics see it as BJP's way of thrusting nationalism on people, who for decades have defined it in an idiom of their own.

This is a new India with a difference. It is not one that evolves naturally but one that is beaten to change. Therefore, BJP's India has three components: break tradition; erase all signs of colonialism; and usher saffron in the garb of nationalism.

Not all of this is bad; but it is not acceptable in toto either. There is a different dimension to each and consequently a specific fall-out. If Modi bashers slam the negatives, his loyalists flag their version of the positives.

One cannot take away from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's grit and determination to usher in a naya Bharat. Neither should we overlook his Party's attempts to tell the minorities, particularly the Muslims, that this is not a country that they can call their own.

Clearly, this invades the idea of a secular India but then BJP has always lashed out at the concept of secularism and rubbished it on grounds of minority appeasement. Worse still, it is not apologetic of pushing its concept of a Hindu rashtra which it imagines is intrinsic to the idea of India, rather Bharat. And for that even if it needs to unleash communalism and throttle democracy, so be it.

A case in point is the recent saffron scarves versus hijab controversy that unfolded in the BJP ruled state of Karnataka.

The seeds were sown in December last year but the issue took a serious turn as the new year set in. It began when Muslim girls in Udupi were debarred from attending classes for wearing a hijab, a head scarf.

For the uninitiated, a hijab is worn by Muslim women for privacy and modesty. It is a tradition deep-rooted in Islam. The jury is out on whether the tradition is

coercive or voluntary.

The issue spread to other colleges in the state when authorities banned hijab on grounds that it violated the prescribed dress code for students.

Things became volatile with Muslim girls protesting that wearing a hijab is a fundamental right. To up the ante, Hindu students came out sporting saffron scarves. And if that was not enough, Dalit students from a college in Chikmagalur adorned blue scarves. If saffron was the colour of hostility to the hijab, apparently, blue was one of solidarity.

Colour apart, the issue has raised a stink. Apart from vertically dividing the student community, it has exposed the BJP and its anti-Muslim stance. Worse still, it has made it known to the Muslims that their religious entitlements are under question under the garb of nationalism.

It is against this backdrop that it is important to assess what BJP state unit chief said underlining the arrogance of having a BJP government in the state: "There is a BJP government in the state and there is no scope for hijab," he had said clearly signalling that the new order which is in place has no room to accommodate an alternative viewpoint.

The BJP has alleged a "hidden hand" behind the ruckus. Even if it is right, nothing can justify the ban which is akin to imposing its will on a community's religious tenets.

BJP's fear that complying with the hijab-demand could lead to another for a mosque in the college, may not be entirely baseless but what it needs to ask itself is: if a situation warrants, will Sikh boys be barred from wearing turbans?

Often accused of creating a false narrative, the BJP is also in the eye of a storm over the national flag unfurling in Srinagar's controversial Lal Chowk area.

On Republic Day, the saffron Party went to town over the tricolour being hoisted atop the Clock Tower in Lal Chowk in the heart of Srinagar.

Activists, allegedly propped up by the BJP, called it a "magical moment", while others dubbed it as historic.

Unfurling or hoisting a national flag is decidedly a goosebump-moment for any nationalist. Hence on this count, there are no surprises.

The state of Jammu and Kashmir does throw up challenges coupled with a little bit of intrigue. Therefore, any move particularly one that has an overdose of nationalism is bound to grab eyeballs.

The unfurling of the national flag at Lal Chowk was one such. It was peddled by the BJP as an event that was made possible after 30 years. Of course there are versions saying that it was the first since Independence. Timeline apart, BJP publicists decided to milk the event to their advantage. That a part of it backfired, is another matter.

As India celebrated its 73rd Republic Day, a hydraulic crane carrying activists and the national flag atop the clock tower were widely publicized.

The significance of the tricolour at the site can be deciphered from the fact that several attempts in the past to hoist the flag were foiled by anti-national elements. The last time the Indian flag fluttered there was way back in 1992

Tri-colour hoisting at Lal Chowk, Srinagar

when BJP's Murli Manohar Joshi unfurled it at the height of militancy in Jammu and Kashmir.

"Since Independence, we have only seen Pakistani flags hoisted here ...today hoisting the national flag on top of the Clock Tower is what Naya Kashmir stands for", said one among the flag-bearers.

Sceptics however rubbish the claim about the BJP branding this as a "first". Dubbing it as a false narrative, they say that there is nothing sacrosanct about Lal Chowk, hence the hullabaloo is only optics.

Politics played out with the Opposition questioning the BJP's move of bringing down the flag within hours of its unfurling on grounds that it violated the Flag Code wherein "the flag should be flown from sunrise to sunset". Others slammed it as a photo-opportunity.

Exaggerated as the move may be, one cannot undermine the spirit that was amplified even as participants danced to patriotic songs and hundreds of Indian flags fluttered across the valley.

In this context, one cannot take away from the BJP's effort to bring Kashmir centre-stage; drive home a narrative that the state is firmly in India's grip; and at the same time tell Pakistan that the territory is non-negotiable. While there may be loopholes in its theory of Naya Kashmir, the messaging is foolproof.

If the national flag initiative in Kashmir is laudatory, then on Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, the government is on weak wicket.

While the initiative cannot be questioned, the placement of Netaji's statue under the canopy of India Gate has been

slammed.

The canopy that was built as a tribute to the Emperor of India, King George V, showcased him in his coronation robes and the Imperial State Crown. The statue was, however, removed in the late sixties in a bid to erase the footprints of imperialism in independent India.

On January 23, this year Narendra Modi unveiled a hologram of Bose there: a stop-gap arrangement till the one in granite is installed.

The move to install Bose's statue was long overdue given that many national heroes were ignored, thanks to the Congress' hegemony. Modi decided to correct this wrong and

It would be a folly to rubbish every move of the Modi government; as it would be to sing paeans. At best, it could be dubbed a mixed bag with its share of good and bad; perception and ground feel; optics and reality

honour leaders other than the Nehru-Gandhi family who have hijacked India's freedom struggle to their advantage.

Yet the idea of Bose's statue under the canopy drew flak, it being a grim reminder of the British rule and India's slavery. Therefore, to see him under a canopy built in honour of those he fought to drive out, is inappropriate, to say the least. So, the question that stares hard in the face is: Will Bose turn in his grave?

Even while BJP scouts for answers, fingers are being pointed at it on another count: dropping Abide With Me from Beating Retreat and replacing it with Aye Mere Watan ke logo.

Written by Henry Francis Lyte, the hymn was seen as a highpoint of the Retreat. The last piece to be played before buglers bring down the flag, it has been an integral part of the Retreat since 1950.

What perhaps went against the ethos of the BJP was the foreign origin of the hymn: the concept of music being universal, seemingly alien to those painting the country saffron.

But it is the other argument that cuts ice: to include tunes that have a wider connect, particularly one that commemorates Indian soldiers who died in the Indo-China war in 1962. On this, the BJP government cannot be faulted.

Therefore, the hue and cry about dropping Mahatma's favourite hymn is misplaced. For non-Gandhians, this is no big deal. A Mahatma's favourite cannot dictate an entire nation; nor can it be the basis of compromising popular appeal.

Using a tune that resonates with the masses makes more sense and Mere Watan...fits the bill. Those shedding tears over Abide... have failed to erase colonialism and embrace nationalism in its essence. Tradition should not be the excuse to retain stuff that should have been shunned years ago.

As for tradition, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman did well by abandoning the briefcase and the halwa ceremony: both hand-downs from past regimes. Till Sitharaman changed it, the briefcase and the halwa were prerequisites of the Union Budget.

It was in 2019 that Sitharaman abandoned the briefcase and substituted it with a bahi-katha, a ledger; last year it was a tablet reportedly to adapt to changing times. This year the halwa ceremony was done away with.

For the uninitiated, the halwa ceremony precedes printing of budget documents. Officials involved in the process are fed halwa with the Union Finance Minister initially acting as server. Amid fears of Omicron, the halwa ceremony was dispensed with, this year. The government also went paperless and did away with printing the Budget.

It would be a folly to rubbish every move of the Modi government; as it would be to sing paeans. At best, it could be dubbed a mixed bag with its share of good and bad; perception and ground feel; optics and reality, and accept that BJP's saffron dipped Bharat is the new order uprooting the old.

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Ashish Mishra gets bail but his troubles are far from over

The Allahabad High Court has granted bail to Ashish Mishra 'Monu', son of the Union Minister of State Ajay Mishra 'Teni', who will soon walk out of the jail – just four months after his arrest. The order has sparked a political row amid ongoing election process in the state, writes **MUDIT MATHUR**

The Lucknow Bench of the Allahabad High Court has granted bail to Ashish Mishra 'Monu', son of the Union Minister of State Ajay Mishra 'Teni', who will soon walk out of the jail – just four months after his arrest. His release was delayed by couple of days due to inconsistency in mentioning offences under which he was chargesheeted but now the High Court has corrected its earlier orders – paving the way of his smooth release. Now, the Court has added charges of conspiracy and murder in its orders granting him bail for these offences also. The order has invoked controversy in political circles during the ongoing election process in the state, where the ruling BJP is seeking a second term in the office. Farmers' organisations, who are making it a poll issue, may challenge the bail order.

The politics of the state once again boiled up over his bail at a time when farmers were demanding ouster of his father from Modi's cabinet. The High Court decision may be a big respite for some BJP leaders just before the fourth phase poll date, but it could further diminish the chances of any possible support in the farmers-dominated constituencies of rural areas. The vibrations of political ramifications could also influence Punjab elections where non-removal of MoS Teni was a hotly debated poll issue.

It may be recalled that eight persons had lost life in the most atrocious incident of mowing down the protesting farmers killing four of them and a journalist in brutal attack from the behind in Lakhimpur Kheri on October 3rd, 2021. Three BJP workers too were killed in retaliatory violent clashes while their vehicle overturned soon after it lost control into a nearby trench a few meters away from the crime scene. The farmers were protesting against the Union MoS for Home Ajay Mishra Teni and also Deputy CM Keshav Maurya

Sukhwinder Singh, father of 19-year-old Gurvinder Singh who was mowed down by Ashish Mishra's car on October 3 last year, said, "His getting bail so soon is not a good sign." "We did not have any hopes earlier with this government. We don't have any hope now because Ajay Mishra Teni is still not removed," he added.

who was on Kheri visit on the fateful day.

The Allahabad High Court in Uttar Pradesh granted him bail on 10th February in F.I.R. No. 219 of 2021, under Sections 147, 148, 149, 307, 326, 427/34 I.P.C., Section 30 of Arms Act and Section 177 of M.V. Act, Police Station Tikuniya, District Lakhimpur Kheri, pointing out the discrepancies in the case against him. The main ground of allowing bail was based on post-mortem reports wherein no gunshot injuries were found on the bodies of the deceased farmers.

However, the High Court failed to examine the fact that the CJM took the cognizance of the chargesheet and committed the case for session trial in accordance with law under Section 34, 302, 307, 326 and 120-B of IPC after investigations. The eyewitness account and video footage of a nearby petrol pump followed with testimonies of 99 witnesses were recorded under section 164 CrPC before the court, and all of them have professedly pointed out presence and involvement Ashish Mishra at the spot. Testimonies of witnesses were verified through investigation at the spot.

The SIT probing the Lakhimpur Kheri violence had filed a 5,000-page chargesheet against 14 accused, including Union minister Ajay Mishra Teni's son Ashish and brother-in-law Virendra Shukla for destroying evidence of crime but so far it has not included the name of the Union Minister Ajay Mishra Teni for conspiracy nor questioned him. The SIT is still investigating and gathering credible evidences against him.

Congress General Secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra said, "A Prime Minister has a moral responsibility towards the nation and it is his dharma to fulfil this responsibility. This dharma is above every dharma. Whichever politician, Prime Minister or government fails to do this, must be ignored."

Addressing a rally in Bilaspur area of Rampur district, she said "Today, that man has got bail and soon, he would be roaming around openly, the man who mowed you down. But whom did the government save? Did it save the farmers? Where were the police and the administration when farmers were killed?" The Congress leader alleged nowhere police acted after Lakhimpur Kheri incident. However, they were present to prevent the Congress members who tried to visit the victims' families soon after the incident, she added.

Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav tweeted, "Beware of the politics of oppression, His protectionists are coming out... from custody. On the issue of grant of bail to Ashish Mishra Monu, Akhilesh said, "When the issue would reach before the Supreme Court, the farmers will get justice. Whosoever had done wrong would be punished."

Trinamool Congress MP Mahua Moitra on her twitter handle, questioned, "How Ashish Mishra qualified for bail? Three basic principles of bail are that accused should not be able to: 1. Intimidate witnesses; 2. Destroy evidence and 3. Be flight risk. How does Ashish Mishra satisfy bail condition 1? Sitting minister's son, arrested only after 3 days, in election season?"

Sukhwinder Singh, father of 19-year-old Gurvinder Singh who was mowed down by Ashish Mishra's car on October 3 last year, said, "His getting bail so soon

The High Court Order

A Lucknow bench of Allahabad High Court on February 10, granted bail to Ashish Mishra alias Monu, the son of junior Union home minister Ajay Mishra 'Teni', in connection with the death of four farmers who were crushed under the car which allegedly belonging to him, in October last.

The court directed his release on furnishing a personal bond and two reliable sureties each of the like amount to the satisfaction of the court concerned. It also imposed certain conditions on Ashish stating that he would not influence the witnesses or tamper with the evidence of the case or otherwise misuse the liberty of bail.

Delivering the order, Justice Rajeev Singh observed, "Considering the facts and circumstances of the case in toto, it is evident that as per the FIR, the role of firing was assigned to Ashish for killing the protesters but in probe, no firearm injuries were found on the body of any of the deceased or on the body of any injured person."

"The prosecution alleged that Ashish provoked the driver of the vehicle for crushing the protesters, however, the driver and two others in the vehicle, had been killed by the protesters. It is further evident that during the investigation, a notice was issued to Ashish and he appeared before the investigating officer. It is also evident that the chargesheet has already been filed. In such circumstances, this court is of the view that Ashish is entitled to be released on bail," Justice Singh held.

The court also expressed concern on protests by farmers without permission of the local administration and directed the chief secretary to issue necessary directions and guidelines for regulating such types of assemblies and processions to avoid the inconvenience caused to citizens.

The court also pulled up the district administration for its slackness, saying "...some persons, for their political benefits, call innocent persons, without due permission under law. In the present case, though the order under Section 144 CrPC was operating, thousands of persons from different districts, even from other states, had gathered, which was very well within the knowledge of the district administration, as is evident from the statement of its officials, but neither any preventive action was taken nor any action against the organizers had been taken."

Allowing the bail plea of Ashish, the bench said, "In case, the story of the prosecution is accepted, thousands of protesters had gathered at the place of incident and there might be a possibility that the driver tried to speed up the vehicle to save himself, on account of which, the incident had taken place."

is not a good sign." "We did not have any hopes earlier with this government. We don't have any hope now because Ajay Mishra Teni is still not removed," he added.

Reacting to the High Court orders, the brother of slayed journalist Raman Kashyap, Aman Kashyap, said, "A bail to an accused is not equivalent to an acquittal. We shall continue to fight... just because he has got bail does not mean the case has ended." "These people are in power in the state and Centre. That's why this has happened. But the people will suitably reply them. It appears that they felt that if the government changes, they will not be able to do what they could do now," he added.

The Supreme Court bench headed by Chief Justice of India N V Ramana had expressed strong displeasure over "intermixing" of evidence by UP investigators probing the cross cases involving the massacre of farmers allegedly overrun by a convoy of three

Ajay Mishra 'Teni'

vehicles from behind, including one owned by Minister of State for Home Ajay Mishra. The collection of evidence in the FIR related to the death of farmers has to be an "independent exercise." Justice Surya Kant had supplemented.

Examining the status report of SIT probe, the bench found that evidence of some of the witnesses in the case relating to the death of the driver and the two BJP workers were overlapping with the case related to the death of four farmers. It raised doubts whether this was being done to benefit a "particular accused."

The Supreme Court directed the SIT to complete its probe soon. It also added three Indian Police Service officers to the team– those who are not from Uttar Pradesh, though they are allocated to the UP cadre. This was done over concerns that local policemen would manipulate the probe. The apex court too had intervened to ensure fair investigation of cases under judicial supervision of a judge of Punjab and Haryana High Court.

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SIGNS OF THE TIMES

HUMRA QURAISHI

The Delhi-based writer and columnist's books include Kashmir: The Untold Story. *She co-authored a series of writings with the late Khushwant Singh and her short stories are part of anthologies. The views expressed are her own*

'I am very patient. But I do get angry when people lie'

Lata Mangeshkar kept herself away from the media glare and was known to be a very private person. However in a rare long conversation, she answered all queries posed by Nasreen Munni Kabir in a candid way

Lata Mangeshkar passed away, leaving back those everlasting songs and also all of those known and unknown and little-known aspects to her personality. She kept herself far away from the media glare and was known to be a very private person, interacting with only close friends and family.

To know more about her, the last two days I have been re-reading this volume on her – 'Lata Mangeshkar...In her own voice. Conversations with Nasreen Munni Kabir'(Niyogi Books). Very readable, it is a detailed conversation flowing along so very effortlessly between the two, Lata Mangeshkar and Nasreen Munni Kabir.

All possible aspects to her personal and professional life are there in this volume as part of the long conversation. She answers all queries put forth by Kabir, in that rather candid way. And though one is tempted to quote extensively but space constraints come in way, so will keep to the most significant quotes of Lata Mangeshkar.

On the controversy about her supposedly strained relationship with her sister Asha Bhosle, she has this to say in this volume: "Asha and I have always been close and still are. In 1947, when she was only fourteen, she wanted to marry a neighbour of ours, Ganpatrao Bhosle, who was a ration inspector. Mai was completely against the marriage. So Asha left home and married against Mai's wishes. Mai was most unhappy ...Once Asha was married her husband did not want her to do anything with us. She wasn't allowed to see us or write to us. This was the situation for years...Asha suffered a lot during those years. She finally left her husband in 1960... It's wrong to talk of rivalry having spoilt our relationship. We are sisters and neighbours. We talk to each other and eat together. If either of us has a problem, we tell each other. And if we have something to celebrate, we celebrate together."

Lata Mangeshkar

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On what upsets Lata Mangeshkar: "I am usually quite patient. But when I hear anyone saying something that I know to be a lie, I get angry. I might not let on and usually go quiet, but inside I am angry when people lie. I can't say I'm a great reader of character but I can tell when someone is genuine or not. I may not get it 100 per cent right, maybe 75 per cent...Another thing that really makes me angry is when I hear someone sing out of tune. I can't stand it."

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On the query of Hindus and Muslims working together in the film industry, she

"It's wrong to talk of rivalry having spoilt our relationship. We are sisters and neighbours. We talk to each other and eat together. If either of us has a problem, we tell each other. And if we have something to celebrate, we celebrate together," said Lata on her strained ties with Asha Bhosle

said: "Yes, we all worked together - there were Hindus and Muslim music directors, lyricists, singers. Sometimes we discussed why Hindus and Muslims fought with one another. We are the same. We are the same colour and the same race. So why? Naushad sahib considered me like his younger sister; he never saw me as different. I spent a lot of time with Majrooh sahib and his family; I never thought of them to be different. We were never divided on religious ground. We never felt any tension between us because some were Hindu and others Muslim. Yet, there was a lot of communal tension around us in those early days. In 1946, terrible riots broke out in Bombay. We were so worried, to the extent that Mai decided to take us all to Kolhapur where we stayed in Master Vinayak's house. But it wasn't long before we returned to Bombay....For me there is no difference between Hindu and Muslim. I didn't see a difference then nor do I see it now. I see the person. If I don't like a person, I just don't like him or her. But my likes and dislikes have nothing to do with them being Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian."

On asked how important is religion to her, she detailed: "I believe in God and everyone in the family does too. Whatever we have is thanks to His benevolence. No matter what you choose to call Him: Allah, Ishwar or God. He gives everything to us. I always bow before God and say: 'You have granted me everything.' I can never forget this. I pray in the morning and at night before I sleep....I prefer silence to talking these days. I'm not always in a mood to talk. I am home most of the time. I listen to music and read. If I feel like talking to someone, I telephone a friend."

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When asked about her not marrying, remaining single, so maybe lonely, she said : "No , not really. Remember I have always lived with my family. I grew up in my family. When I was young I had many responsibilities but I was always made to feel like a protected child. It was Mai who was the eldest in the family and it was she who looked after us all. She was only thirty-six or thirty- seven when my father died. She was a very peaceful person, tolerant and patient. When she passed away in 1995,I felt her loss deeply. It was then I became the head of the family. I had to grow up."

*****

On whether she had ever met Mahatma Gandhi, she replied: "No, but I heard him speak at a public gathering at Shivaji Park and at Chowpatty in Bombay in the early 1940s. He made a great impression on us and on everyone who was there. We had tremendous respect for Gandhiji and also for Jai Prakash Narayan too. But I had no interest in politics then and nor do politics interest me know."

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On does she remember where was she on 14 August 1947 - the day India gained Independence?

"We were at home and in the evening we all went out to see the lights. There was much rejoicing on the streets and a great feeling of happiness. It was a big day."

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On whether Lata had an inkling of soaring such heights of fame and success. There is this dream detailed right at the start of the volume.

In fact, right in the Introduction to this book, Kabir starts off detailing this particular dream: "Lata Mangeshkar remembers a dream that returned to her every single night when she was in her early twenties. Coming home from recording two songs in the morning, two in the afternoon, two in the evening, she would fall asleep and the dream unfurled: it is early morning and she finds herself all alone at a black-stoned temple by the sea. Unaware of the deity associated with the temple, she makes her way through the sacred space. At the back of the temple there is a door. She opens it and sees a few steps leading from the door to the dappled water. She sits on the stone steps and the waves gently wash over her feet...Young Lata thought nothing of the dream but when it reoccurred night after night, and for several months, she decided to share it with her mother, Shudhhamati Mangeshkar, who listened quietly to her and said: 'God has blessed you. You will be very famous one day.'"

Lata Mangeshkar with her siblings.

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Delimitation panel's proposals may alter Valley's electoral map

Arbitrary reorganization of the constituencies in the delimitation panel's proposals has alarmed major J&K parties like the National Conference and the PDP, who see in the changes a design to disempower the majority community, writes **RIYAZ WANI**

In its second set of proposals, the Delimitation Commission has proposed sweeping changes to the electoral map of Kashmir, triggering deep fears in Kashmir that a strategy was afoot to convert the demographic majority of the former state into a political minority.

The Commission which was established in 2020 to increase the number of J&K Assembly seats and redraw boundaries of electoral constituencies has already enhanced the number of Assembly seats by seven, six of which were given to Jammu and only one to Kashmir Valley. This is despite an estimated 70 lakh people living in the Valley, according to 2011 census, compared to 53 lakh in Jammu division.

Now the new proposals have sought to redraw the constituencies which are again seen as an attempt at gerrymandering to reduce the political weight of the majority community in future elections.

In the draft paper, the Commission has sought to radically change the boundaries of the constituencies in Baramulla, Kupwara, Srinagar, Kulgam and Anantnag districts of the Kashmir division.

In Kashmir Valley, the only additional seat has been carved in Kupwara district. The new seat has been named after the township of Trehgam and it includes Keran, parts of Kralpora tehsil among others.

Similarly in Baramulla district which has five Assembly segments, two seats have been renamed as Kunzer and Tangmarg constituencies and they have been carved by splitting Gulmarg and merging the Sangrama constituency.

Gulmarg and Sangrama constituencies as they were named earlier have ceased to exist.

This radical splitting of constituencies has also been done in South Kashmir, a traditional stronghold of the People's Democratic Party. For example, the Shangus tehsil has been split between Anantnag East and Larnoo constituencies. Similarly, Kokernag constituency has also been split between Larnoo and Dooru.

Kulgam, another South Kashmir district that earlier had four Assembly seats will now have only three with one of its seats Hom Shali Bugh being included in the Devsar constituency in the district.

Srinagar district will now have a separate constituency in Chanpora area. It is being created by redrawing some other constituencies of the district.

Another far-reaching change that is being proposed is the redrawing of the Anantnag constituency in South Kashmir by merging with it Rajouri and Poonch from the Jammu region.

Radical electoral makeover

Such arbitrary reorganization of the constituencies has alarmed major J&K parties like the National Conference and the PDP, both of which see in the changes a design to disempower the majority community.

The National Conference which has three members in the parliament has rejected proposals. The party said it will send a detailed response to the Commission at the earliest. The Commission has sought the views of the associate members before placing the report in

the public domain.

Similarly, the PDP has termed the redrawing of the constituencies as part of the BJP's attempt to turn Gandhi's India into Godse's India "The draft is a reflection of the BJP furthering its divisive agenda, separating Hindus and Muslims. They want to make it Godse's India," Mufti told media. "It is unacceptable. A sheer dictatorship is prevailing in the country."

The former chief minister said that the BJP is trying to strengthen its constituencies and attempting to make voters irrelevant.

"Delimitation Commission's proposal has not come as a surprise," she said. "It is another onslaught on democracy in Jammu and Kashmir."

Mehbooba also revealed that the issue of the Delimitation Commission's draft will be discussed in the meeting of the People's Alliance for the Gupkar Declaration on February 23.

As of yet, there has been no reaction from the separatist groups still reeling from the three-year crackdown unleashed by the government. Almost all separatist leaders are in jail. Any statements issued by them are released from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. The government has also curbed the space for protests, including peaceful ones.

But the changing of the boundaries of the constituencies after giving six of the seven new Assembly seats to Jammu has created deep apprehensions in Kashmir including in some parts of Jammu too. People in the Valley see in the Commission's moves a clear pattern to political disempower the majority community.

According to the 2011 census, 68.31 percent of Kashmir's population is Muslim, while Hindus constitute 28.44 percent, Sikhs 2 percent, and Buddhists who are in the now separated Ladakh a little more than 1 percent.

But broken down into two regions - Kashmir and Jammu - a different picture emerges. Kashmir's population of around 70 lakh is over 97 percent Muslim, with the remaining 3 percent comprising Kashmiri Pandits and Sikhs. In contrast, Jammu's population of more than 53 lakh comprises 65 percent Hindus, 31 percent Muslims and 4 percent Sikhs.

The demographics of the majority of the Assembly constituencies in Kashmir Valley favours the majority community as all 47 constituencies are Muslim-dominated. Similarly, before delimitation, Muslims were in majority in around 17 of 37 constituencies of Jammu.

"The government of India seeks to overturn the demographic advantage of the majority community in elections by giving more seats to the minorities," said a political analyst who didn't want to identify himself. "Gerrymandering is already underway to ensure this outcome. The move would snatch political power from the region's already disempowered Muslim majority".

Two and a half years ago, New Delhi withdrew the semi-autonomous status of Kashmir, and downgraded the state into two federally administered areas - Kashmir and Ladakh. Ever since, the union government has thrown the region open to settlement by outsiders, something that was barred under the scrapped Article 370. This has set in motion a process of demographic change which, in the long run, is feared to turn the region's majority into a minority. But pending that, people see in the delimitation of seats an attempt to accomplish artificially what a demographic change would.

"My understanding is that the J&K Delimitation Commission itself seems to be playing a game that is detrimental to the interests of the people of J&K State," said the former union minister Saif-u-Din Soz. "I have a feeling that the J&K State's Non-BJP mainstream, along with the National Conference, should rise to the occasion and organize a sustained and strong democratic movement against the RSS/BJP's organized effort to change the "Electoral Profile of The State" (sic)."

A PDP politician who didn't want to identify himself said the proposed changes are expected to alter the electoral game in the union territory. "There is a clear attempt at political engineering," said a PDP politician. "The BJP has a multi-pronged strategy to ensure there is Hindu consolidation in Jammu in its favour. It has already benefitted from this consolidation in three successive elections since 2014 - two parliamentary and one Assembly".

In 2015 J&K Assembly election, the party won 25 of 37 seats in Jammu, enabling it to share power with the PDP which secured 28 seats, a predominant majority of these in Kashmir Valley.

But the reduction of the gap in the Assembly seats between Kashmir and Jammu and now the redrawing of constituencies is set to redraw the political map of the union territory. The BJP which has a deep presence in Jammu could expect to have more political weight in the future J&K Assembly. And even if a Kashmir based party were to form or lead a future government, it would have little manoeuvring space to carry out its agenda or overturn the laws passed by the New Delhi backed administration over the last two years.

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NEWS & VIEWS

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Forest cover increases, but Northeast poses a challenge

A report prepared by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) points to the loss of forest cover in the Northeast. Experts says the loss is of great concern as the Northeastern states are repositories of great biodiversity

While natural calamities may have led to much of the loss in Northeast, the declining forests will in turn increase the impact of landslides, say experts. It will also impact water catchment in the region, which is already seeing degradation of its water resources

The UN International Day of Forests falls on March 21, 2022 and its theme is "Forests and sustainable production and consumption." It is time to analyze the latest report released during January 2022 titled 'India State of Forest Report 2021' prepared by the Forest Survey of India (FSI). The report throws a challenge to check a decline in the Northeast and degradation of natural forests though it has found the country's forest cover has increased by 1,540 sq km since 2019.

Experts say that this loss is of great concern as the Northeastern states are repositories of great biodiversity. While natural calamities may have led to much of the loss, the declining forests will in turn increase the impact of landslides, they say. It will also impact water catchment in the region, which is already seeing degradation of its water resources. Unlike other states, where forests are clearly managed by the forest department and state governments, the Northeastern states follow a different ownership pattern —community ownership and protected tribal land – which makes conservation activities challenging.

The total forest and tree cover of the country is 80.9 million hectares which is 24.62 percent of the geographical area of the country. As compared to the assessment of 2019, there is an increase of 2,261 sq km in the total forest and tree cover of the country. The report reveals that 17 states and UTs have above 33 percent of the geographical area under forest cover.

The ISFR-2021 provides information on forest cover, tree cover, mangrove cover, growing stock, carbon stock in India's forests, forest fire monitoring, forest cover in tiger reserve areas, above ground estimates of biomass using SAR data & climate change hotspots in Indian forests.

Major findings

• The total forest and tree cover of the country is 80.9 million hectare which is 24.62 percent of the geographical area of the country. As compared to the assessment of 2019, there is an increase of 2,261 sq km in the total forest and tree cover of the country. Out of this, the increase in the forest cover has been observed as 1,540 sq km and that in tree cover is 721 sq km.

• Increase in forest cover has been observed in open forest followed by very dense forest. Top three states showing an increase in forest cover are Andhra Pradesh (647 sq km) followed by Telangana (632 sq km) and Odisha (537 sq km).

• Area-wise Madhya Pradesh has the largest forest cover in the country followed by Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Maharashtra. In terms of forest cover as percentage of total geographical area, the top five States are Mizoram (84.53%), Arunachal Pradesh (79.33%), Meghalaya (76.00%), Manipur (74.34%) and Nagaland (73.90%).

• 17 states/UT's have above 33 percent of the geographical area under forest cover. Out of these states and UT's, five states/UTs namely Lakshadweep, Mizoram, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya have more than 75 percent forest cover while 12 states/UTs namely Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, Goa, Kerala, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu, Assam, Odisha, have forest cover between 33 percent to 75 percent.

• Total mangrove cover in the country is 4,992 sq km. An increase of 17 sq Km in mangrove cover has been observed as compared to the previous assessment of 2019. Top three states showing mangrove cover increase are Odisha (8 sq km) followed by Maharashtra (4 sq km) and Karnataka (3 sq km).

• Total carbon stock in the country's forest is estimated to be 7,204 million tonnes and there is an increase of 79.4 million tonnes in the carbon stock of the country as compared to the last assessment of 2019. The annual increase in the carbon stock is 39.7 million tonnes.

Accuracy level

In tune with the Government's vision of digital India and the need for integration of digital data sets, FSI has adopted using the vector boundary layers of various administrative units up to districts level as provided by Survey of India along with digital open series topo sheets, in order to ensure comprehensive compatibility with the geographical areas as reported in Census, 2011.

The biennial assessment of forest cover of the country using mid-resolution Satellite data is based on interpretation of LISS-III data from Indian Remote Sensing satellite data (Resourcesat-II) with a spatial resolution of 23.5 meters with the scale of interpretation

1:50,000 to monitor forest cover and forest cover changes at District, State and National level.

This information provides inputs for various global level inventories, reports such as GHG Inventory, Growing Stock, Carbon Stock, Forest Reference Level (FRL) and international reporting to UNFCCC targets under CBD Global Forest Resource Assessment (GFRA) for planning and scientific management of forests.

Satellite data for the entire country was procured from NRSC for the period October to December 2019. The satellite data interpretation is followed by rigorous ground trotting. Information from other collateral sources are also used to improve the accuracy oof the intrepreted image.

The decadal assessment of change in forest cover within Tiger Reserves, Corridors and Lion conservation area helps in assessing the impact of conservation measures and management interventions that have been implemented over the years

The accuracy level achieved in the current assessment is significantly high. The accuracy of forest cover classification has been assessed 92.99%. The accuracy of classification between forest and non-forest classes has been assessed 95.79% against internationally accepted

accuracy of classification of more than 85%. A rigorous QC & QA exercise was also carried out.

Other features of ISFR

In the present ISFR 2021, FSI has included a new chapter related to the assessment of forest cover in the Tiger Reserves, Corridors and Lion conservation area of India. In this context, the decadal assessment of change in forest cover within Tiger Reserves, Corridors and Lion conservation area helps in assessing the impact of conservation measures and management interventions that have been implemented over the years. For decadal assessment, change in forest cover, during the period between ISFR 2011 (data period 2008 to 2009) and the current cycle (ISFR 2021, data period 2019-2020) within each Tiger Reserves has been analysed.

A new initiative of FSI has also been documented in the form of a chapter, where the 'Above Ground Biomass' has been estimated. FSI, in collaboration with Space Application Centre (SAC), ISRO, Ahmedabad, initiated a special study for estimation of Above Ground Biomass (AGB) at pan-India level, using L- band of Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) data. The results for the States of Assam and Odisha (as well as AGB maps), were presented earlier in ISFR 2019.

The FSI in collaboration with Birla Institute of Technology & Science (BITS) Pilani, Goa Campus has performed a study based on 'Mapping of Climate Change Hotspots in Indian Forests'. The collaborative study was carried out with the objective to map the climatic hotspots over the forest cover in India, using computer model-based projection of temperature and rainfall data, for the three future time periods that are 2030, 2050 and 2085.

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Proposed RIC grouping faces tough challenges

Russian President Putin and Indian PM Modi will face formidable hurdles in evolving a joint platform comprising Russia, India and China or RIC for close economic and strategic co-operation among the three major powers. A report by **GOPAL MISRA**

Russian President Putin and Indian PM Modi will face formidable hurdles in evolving a joint platform comprising Russia, India and China or RIC for close economic and strategic co-operation among the three major powers. Much depends upon China, whether it decides to climb down from its assertive belligerent muscle-fixing approach for peace and cooperation. A report by Gopal Misra

The Indian establishment led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, though disillusioned by Chinese double-speak and its shifting stances, is preparing for the proposed alliance of Russia, India and China (RIC). However, much depends upon China, whether it decides to climb down from its assertive belligerent muscle-fixing approach for peace and cooperation. She has decided to work with the Russian President Vladimir Putin to cement a joint platform, RIC, for ensuring better economic cooperation and security in Eurasia to the South Asian Region.

The RIC can re-script the global politics in the region, if China genuinely addresses Indian concerns. Apart from demanding to scrap the Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, China has always supported the Islamic jihadists. It vetoed India's petition for banning Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar. In spite of a number of meetings, the Chinese president Xi Jinping has refused India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group. He also signed new agreements with the visiting Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan for the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor or CPEC passing through the Indian territories of Jammu-Kashmir under the Pakistani occupation.

Apart from these recent irritating anti-India acts, the Union Minister of State for External Affairs, V Muraleedharan told the Lok Sabha on February 4, 2022, that China continues to be in an illegal occupation of approximately 38,000 square km of Indian Territory in the Union Territory of Ladakh. In his written reply, he also stated that it has also obtained 5,180 sq km of Shaksgam Valley from Pakistan. He also told the House that under the so-called China-Pakistan 'Boundary Agreement' signed in1963, Pakistan illegally ceded the Indian Territory to China.

It is difficult for any government in India to accept Xi Jinping's suggestion that the relations between the two countries must move forward ignoring the territorial disputes. Therefore, Muraleedharan's assertion that the government of India has never recognised the so-called China-Pakistan 'Boundary Agreement' of 1963 and has consistently maintained that it is illegal and invalid reflects the mood in India. In this context, the Congress MP Rahul Gandhi's accusation that the Modi government has brought Pakistan and China together, is the expression of the common perception in the country. "What you have done is, you have brought them together", he commented, and further stated, "Look at the weapons they are buying, the countries they are speaking to. The country is at risk, it is at risk from the inside. I am very uncom-

fortable about where my country stands right now."

Amidst the Russian-Ukraine standoff, Putin's decision to fly to Beijing to jointly inaugurate the Winter Olympics with his Chinese counterpart, XI Jinping, shows the seriousness he attaches to the RIC. The international sports event was boycotted by the US-led west. India did not attend the event due to the continuous Chinese belligerence on her northern borders and also for entrusting Qi Fabao, the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) regiment commander involved in the June 15, 2020 clash with India army in the Galwan Valley of Eastern Ladakh, with the duty to carry the Winter Olympic torch.

The RIC's success, however, will depend upon China, whether it is ready to eschew belligerence and abandon its policy of nibbling its neighbours' territories of India, Nepal, Myanmar, Vietnam and many others. Maybe, China over estimates the strength of its armed forces, the PLA and 'genuinely' believes that it is an invincible force in the world.

The Chinese for the time being, may not demand some of the disputed Russian territories, but its maps and civil society blogs claim a large Russian territories as a part of China. They include the Russian port of Vladivostok, which was ceded by China to Russia as a result of the Treaty of Aigun of 1858 and the Treaty of Peking of 1860.

In 1969, the USSR and China had fought for several months near Damansky Island on the Ussuri River, Manchuria. The conflict finally resulted in a ceasefire, but caused heavy casualties on both sides. Since then the status quo is maintained, but it prompted the USA to evolve close ties with China to counter the USSR.

India hopes that during the year 2022, Putin will finally convince China that it should not squander its newly acquired position as a Superpower accompanied by formidable economic strength in 'unnecessary' military muscle-flexing. Few are now scared of the PLA. It is considered necessary for the success of the RIC that China should be asked to behave like a Superpower and stop nibbling the territories of the neighbours under one or the other pretext. The PLA's weaknesses are also being discussed in various Chinese documents, especially in the army's newspaper, the PLA Daily. In a recently published document, it bemoans that the armed forces suffer from 'peace disease'. A PLA General, He Lei, has even stated that his biggest regret before retiring is that he has never fought a war. However, in spite of these observations, one should not undermine the PLA's prowess. It is one of the best-equipped army in the world. It could rejuvenate with the real experience on the war front within a short period.

The RIC Mission

The RIC is a well-conceived peace and cooperation joint platform Putin has initiated. It is expected to usher in Russia in an assertive role in the contemporary geo-politics. Earlier, during the first decade of the 21st century, Russia had checkmated the US-led western powers in the tricky West Asian politics by supporting President Bashar Hafez al-Assad in Syria. It is also claimed Russian intelligence had forewarned the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan about an impending military coup.

However, Erdogan recently visited Ukraine as a part of the NATO initiative that too without disrupting his 'complicated relationship' with Russia. In other words, Turkey is keen to retain its membership in NATO, but keeping off from any military adventure.

In this backdrop, India-Russia relationship become much more important, especially when Modi, who have been to China five times and had 18 summits, both formal and informal, with Xi Jinping. He, perhaps, could have suffered 'bigger humiliation' than India's 1962 defeat in June 2020, but fortunately India's brave-hearts turned the table during the Galwan Valley clashes. The setback to India during the regime of Jawaharlal Nehru could be attributed to the repeated assurances of the Indian Communist leaders, who had met Mao Zedong on the advice of the USSR leader, Nikita Khrushchev, just a few weeks before the Chinese aggression on October 20, 1962. Mao had assured them that China had no plans to invade India. Also, it is widely believed that Nehru's assessment was that due to the growing differences between the USSR and China in Central Asia, Mao Zedong, would not open a front in South Asia. He and his defence minister, Krishna Menon, did not realize that an ill-equipped Indian army was a soft target for China to assert its military might in the region. The purpose was to humiliate India, and it was served.

On the other hand, in India, the mandarins in the South Block advised by the foreign secretary, S. Jaishankar, who later was elevated as the foreign minister, did not lower the guards despite the frequent India-China summits. His two crucial postings as envoy to China and the USA had made him quite aware of the Chinese agenda, its style of diplomacy based on half truths and double-speak. Therefore, there was little surprise for Indians, when the Chinese continued to make efforts for nibbling Indian territo-

ries from the snow-clad high Himalayas in Ladakh to Bhutan in the eastern theatre.

Putin's Initiative

Putin is quite aware of the efforts of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, his predecessors, seeking European identity and who were even prepared to join NATO, and how they were denied their rightful presence and identity. He has also been enraged by the tricks and strategies of the western powers, which were trying to encircle Russia by enrolling the erstwhile republics of USSR to NATO to dwarf its global stature. In a bid to counter the western powers, Russia has invoked the Brezhnev doctrine to keep allies and republics together. Under this doctrine, USSR had supported India during the 1971 Bangladesh War, when the people were facing unprecedented genocide from their own army for demanding democracy. On the other hand, the Americans had sent the seventh Fleet to support the army and impress upon India to keep off from the civil war.

It goes to the credit of Putin, who took extra efforts during the Moscow negotiations following the unfortunate Galwan clashes for maintaining peace. He, thus, succeeded in preventing a large scale flare-up between two Asian giants having the state-of-the art arsenals, both conventional and nuclear. The Chinese also accepted the Russian advice to release 10 Indian soldiers captured during the Galwan Clashes. He also appreciated Jaishankar's reluctance to attend the RIC meeting scheduled on June 23, just a week after the clashes. Both Putin and Modi know that XI Jinping yields only "under pressure".

China hides casualties

Few were surprised in India that China was hiding its number of casualties in the Galwan valley clashes, when an investigative report published in an Australian newspaper, The Klaxon, exposed PLA's massive 'disinformation' campaign about the real numbers of the Chinese casualties. The Chinese had quietly cremated most of its sol-

The Blame Game

The two senior central ministers, Rajnath Singh, the Defence Minister, and S. Jaishankar, appear to be fond of in indulging in blame games against Rahul. They invoke and focus on the past mistakes, but avoid the 'blunders' being committed by them. The quote from the past that during the regime of Jawaharlal Nehru, Rahul's great-grandfather, China had encroached upon the vast lands of the Shaksgam Valley. Instead of advising Rahul to re-visit the history, Jayshankar should have confessed that the Indian establishment has repeatedly failed to understand the Chinese war game, Wei, perhaps, a Chinese version of conspiracies of Shakuni of Mahabharata fame.

It was expected of the two stalwarts to explain to the people that in spite of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi's 18 times meetings with Xi Jinping and five times or more visits to China, why the government promoted business with our northern neighbour, who has been opposing even the blacklisting of the Jihadists responsible for 26/11 attack on Mumbai. Neither Modi nor his cabinet colleagues ever dare to criticise or expose China's double-speak.

It is expected of them to explain why despite continuous 'anti-India' stances in the UN Security Council, the Union government and even the BJP-led states, especially Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, were in overdrive to seek the Chinese investments estimated to be in billions of USD. A lid on these business deals was opened in a press briefing of the Indian National Congress, when the party spokesman, Pawan Khera stated that the Gujarat alone has inked investment deals with various Chinese entities to the tune of Rs. 43,000 crores in the fields of industrial parks, textile hubs, smart cities etc.

Neither the state governments nor the Centre ever cared to challenge the information, but they choose to indulge in the blame game.

diers killed in the action without informing their families. Its media, however, claimed about only four casualties, while the real figure was 36 or more. They had succumbed in the icy water of the river. Of the four Chinese soldiers, the PLA has officially accepted the death of a junior sergeant, Wang Zhuoran, by drowning. The newspaper has attributed its report to a year-long investigations based on interviews with the Chinese of the mainland and the information shared by the Weibo users on this social platform.

Confrontation with Vietnam

For the past two decades, the relationship between China and Vietnam has been on decline. In 1979, the PLA's mission to Vietnam had flopped, when the seasoned Vietnamese soldiers trounced its soldiers. It had decided to punish Vietnam, a neighbouring Communist country, for confiscating properties of its overseas citizens and imposing restrictions on them.

The China-Vietnam conflict became more pronounced following the UNESCO decision to allow China to set up five observation posts for worldwide survey, which included one of them to be set up in the Spratly Island. After numerous surveys and patrols, in April 1987 China chose Fiery Cross Reef as an ideal location for the observation post, because the unoccupied reef was remote from other settlements, and it was large enough for the observation post. On the other hand, Johnson South Reef, which is 150 kilometres from the Fiery Cross Reef, is close to the Vietnamese inhabited Sin Cowe Island. In January and February 1988, Vietnamese forces began establishing a presence at surrounding reefs, including Collins Reef and Lansdowne Reef in order to monitor Chinese activity, which led to a series of confrontations. The two countries remain in dispute over political and territorial issues in the East Sea or the South China Sea, which includes a 1281 km border.

India-Vietnam ties

The four-day visit of Vuong Dinh Hue, Chairman of the National Assembly of Vietnam, to India in December 2021, re-emphasised the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two countries. The high-level visit is taking amidst the news that India might soon supply the nuclear-capable Brahmos missiles to Vietnam. In 2022, the two countries will also be celebrating 50 years of their diplomatic relations. The purpose of the visit, as explained by Hue, is to push forward their bilateral relations, and also to compare their notes of international and global issues of common concern, and seek solutions to global challenges for contributing to peace, security, stability and development in the region and the world.

In his bid to make RIC an effective international alliance, Putin has to adopt a broad-spectrum approach for redefining the existing ties among the nations of this region. One such example is Vietnam, a close ally of India and Russia, but having disputes with China. It is for Xi Jinping to re-establish amicable ties with countries in the region and win their confidence. Meanwhile, India is continuing her efforts to evolve closer ties in the region. In a virtual meeting of the India-Vietnam Joint Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation, which was co-chaired by Jaishankar and his Vietnamese counterpart Pham Binh Minh, the two countries have embarked upon much closer cooperation.

Rajnath Singh and the Vietnamese defence minister, Gen Ngo Xuan Lich, have also agreed to extend Indian cooperation to Vietnam in developing its defence industry.

In this backdrop, Putin and Modi will be facing formidable hurdles in evolving a joint platform comprising Russia, India and China or RIC for close economic and strategic co-operation among the three major powers.

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China fueled insurgency in India

Jaishankar has responded to charge made by Rahul Gandhi over India letting China and Pakistan to come closer. "In 1963, Pakistan illegally handed over the Shaksgam valley to China. Beijing built the Karakoram highway through PoK in the 1970s. From the 1970s, the two countries also had close nuclear collaboration. In 2013, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor started. So, ask yourself: were China and Pakistan distant then?" he quipped.

However, Jaishanker did not care to state that China and Pakistan were jointly funding, arming and training Mizo and Naga insurgents.

The present chief minister of Mizoram, Zoramthanga, had told this journalist during the Mizo peace talks that China and Pakistan were actively promoting the separatist movement of the Mizo National Front. He has also penned these details in his autobiography, MILARI, written in Mizo language.

The nightingale will live forever through her songs

The iconic Lata Mangeshkar has passed into eternity but our own nightingale will live for ever through her classic, timeless songs and her sheer aesthetic beauty, writes **SHVETA MISHRA**

The nation observed a two-day national mourning, befitting the Bharat Ratna recipient Lata Mangeshkar. However, time will not be enough to fill the void she has left behind and her legacy will ever remain. Her was the voice that could melt the heart of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru with "Ae mere watan ke logo". In fact she was a unifying force that transcended borders, political affiliations, caste, creed, class and religion and united music lovers across nations. In life as in death, Lata Mangeshkar united people and nations, with Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai, Nepal's President Bidya Devi Bhandari, the Embassies of US and Israel in India and the French and German Ambassadors to India paying rich tributes.

The nation bid adieu to Bharat Ratna Lata Mangeshkar with President Ram Nath Kovind and Prime Minister Narendra Modi leading the tributes. The 92-year-old legend, who lent her melodious voice to over 40,000 songs in a career spanning eight decades, died at Mumbai's Breach Candy Hospital due to multi-organ failure. She was consigned to flames with full state honours at Mumbai's Shivaji Park. The national flag atop Rashtrapati Bhavan was at half-mast as the Centre declared a two-day national mourning and a state funeral for the icon. The Rajya Sabha was adjourned after obituary references to the legendary singer with a similar decision in the Lok Sabha as the Budget Session was underway. A host of celebrities from all walks of life were in attendance at Shivaji Park to pay their last respects as the late singer's mortal remains draped in the national flag were brought for the final rites.

Floral tributes were paid on behalf of President Ram Nath Kovind, who earlier said, "An artiste born but once in centuries, Lata didi was an exceptional human being, full of warmth, as I found whenever I met her. The divine voice has gone quiet forever but her melodies will remain immortal, echoing in eternity." At Shivaji Park, PM Modi was seen consoling the Mangeshkar family, including her sisters Asha Bhosle and Usha Mangeshkar. The PM earlier said he was anguished beyond words. Tweeting recollections with the late singer, the PM said, "The kind and caring Lata didi has left us. She leaves a void in our nation that cannot be filled. The coming generations will remember her as a stalwart of Indian culture, whose melodious voice had an unparalleled ability to mesmerise people." The PM described the late singer

as a boon.

Lata Mangeshkar's brother Hridaynath lit the funeral pyre, with Maharashtra Governor Bhagat Singh Koshyari, CM Uddhav Thackeray, Deputy CM Ajit Pawar, NCP chief Sharad Pawar, actors Shahrukh Khan and Aamir Khan, MNS president Raj Thackeray and Sachin Tendulkar present among others. Actor Amitabh Bachchan earlier paid homage to the singer at her Mumbai residence.

Tributes poured in all day with former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his wife Gursharan Kaur describing the late singer as a great daughter of India. "She was the Nightingale of India and through her songs made an immense contribution to the cultural integration of the country. Her passing away is an immense loss to our nation and the void is going to be impossible to fill," Manmohan Singh said. Congress president Sonia Gandhi said, "I am numbed that the voice of the Nightingale of India has fallen silent today. An era has ended. Her soulful voice, patriotic melodies and a life of struggle will always inspire generations." Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla also paid condolences, saluting the singer's journey.

Actor Dharmendra said, "The whole world is sad, can't believe you have left us !!! We will miss you Lata ji...Pray your soul be in peace". Amitabh Bachhan said, "She has left us...The voice of a million centuries has left us...Her voice resounds now in the Heavens! Prayers for calm and peace." Hema Malini said, "Feb 6 is a dark day for us — the legend who has given us a treasure trove of lilting songs, the Nightingale of India, Lata ji, has left us to continue her divine music in heaven. It is a personal loss for me, as our affection and admiration for each other was mutual." Akshay Kumar said, "Meri Awaaz Hi Pehchaan Hain, Gar Yaad Rahe...And how can one forget such a voice! Deeply saddened by the passing away of Lata Mangeshkar ji, my sincere condolences and prayers."

Surinder Sharma, from Chandigarh, got to meet Lata Mangeshkar at a programme in Mumbai during the late seventies. "She was a living Goddess; humble and sweet. She was amused that I taught chemistry at Panjab University and acted too," he fondly recalls. While she sang in many languages, Sharma lists memorable numbers from Punjabi films — Pyaar De Bhulekhe (Guddi), Pa Te Vichodhe (Reshma) and Nale Lambi Te Nale Kali (Lachhi).

Born on September 28, 1929, in a family steeped in classical musical tradition, her singing talent was both spotted and honed by her father Pandit Deenanath Mangeshkar. His early demise propelled her towards the world of acting and later singing — she rendered her first song at 13. Soon, she was to become not just the voice but also the soul of Hindi film music

Born on September 28, 1929, in a family steeped in classical musical tradition, her singing talent was both spotted and honed by her father Pandit Deenanath Mangeshkar. His early demise propelled her towards the world of acting and later singing — she rendered her first song at 13. Soon, she was to become not just the voice but also the soul of Hindi film music. In fact, starting at five, Lata Mangeshkar, under the tutelage of her father, Deenanath Mangeshkar, a Hindustani classical vocalist, later became the undisputed 'melody queen'. Spread over seven long decades, right from patriotic to peppy, romantic to sorrowful, bhajans and more, her songs are a treasure trove to cherish. Performing at nine to losing her father at 13, the eldest among the four siblings, Lata took on the responsibility of the entire family. Singing, which was her passion, soon became her profession. While her father was a known theatre actor too, Lata's true love was always music.

While she might put Aye Dil-E-Nadan as one among her most memorable experiences, she also sang wonderful numbers, including Aayega Aane Wala (Mahal), Uthaye Ja Unke Sitam (Andaz), Hothon Main Aisi Baat (Jewel Thief), Aaj Phir Jeene Ki Tamanna Hai (Guide), Aye Maalik Tere Bande Hum (Do Ankhen Barah Haath), and the famous Aye Mere Watan Ke Logo (1963).

A song for every occasion

- Aayega Aanewala from Mahal, 1949
- Ajeeb Dastan Hai Yeh from Dil Apna Aur Preet Parai, 1960
- Pyar Kiya To Darna Kya from Mughal-E-Azam, 1960
- Lag Ja Gale from Woh Kaun Thi? 1964
- Aaj Phir Jeene Ki Tamanna from Guide, 1965
- Chalte Chalte Yun Hi Koi from Pakeezah, 1972
- Dekha Ek Khwaab from Silsila, 1981
- Dil Hoom Hoom Kare from Rudaali, 1993
- Tujhe Dekha To from Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, 1995
- Luka Chuppi from Rang De Basanti, 2006

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Rahul rails against govt on jobs, rich-poor divide

Congress' Rahul Gandhi's speech during a debate on the President's address, focused on 3 main points: creation of two Indias, one rich and one poor; destruction of institutions, and the security threat the nation faces from the coming together of China and Pakistan, writes **AMIT AGNIHOTRI**

The Opposition, led by Congress Lok Sabha member Rahul Gandhi, attacked the Centre in Parliament saying government policies had created two Indias over the past seven years.

Rahul slammed the Centre while speaking during a debate on President Ram Nath Kovind's address to the joint sitting of the Rajya Sabha and the Lok Sabha on January 31, which marked the start of the Budget session of Parliament.

According to the Congress leader, the Presidential address mentioned a lot of things that the government claimed to have done but didn't really contain the deeper strategic issues that the country wanted to hear.

"It looked to me as if it had been constructed not by the vision of leadership, but by a group of bureaucrats, who had simply to put something down on paper. So, what did the Presidential address miss? I think there are three fundamental things that were not spoken about in the Presidential address," said Rahul.

His speech focused on three main points, creation of two Indias, one rich and one poor, due to government policies, destruction of institutions, and the threat to national security from the coming together of rivals China and Pakistan.

Elaborating on the issues, Rahul said: "The first and what I consider to be the most important is the idea that there are now two Indias. There is now no longer one India. One India is for the extremely rich people - for those who have immense wealth, for those who have immense power, for those who do not need a job, for those who do not need water connections, electricity connections, but, for those who control the heartbeat of the country; and then another India for the poor."

Highlighting that lack of jobs was affecting the youth, the Congress leader said that there has been a 46 per cent drop in manufacturing jobs in the country and alleged the government had destroyed the unorganised sector.

"You are focusing completely on five or ten people. I don't have a problem with that. I don't have a problem with big industries, focus on them, but please realise that they cannot produce jobs for you. Small and medium industries are the only people who can produce jobs for you, that is the reality," Rahul said.

Noting that there were two competing visions of the country, the Congress leader said that India was described as a Union of States and not as a nation. This meant that people from Tamil Nadu had the same right as those from Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram or Jammu and Kashmir. The Union of States, he further said, meant it was a negotiation, or a conversation or a partnership and not a kingdom.

"No matter what fantasies you might have. You will never ever rule over the

Attacking the Centre's foreign policy, Rahul said: "The single biggest strategic goal of India's foreign policy had been to keep Pakistan and China separate. This is fundamental for India and what you have done is, you have brought them together and this is the single biggest crime that you could commit against the people of India."

people of the states of India. It has never been done in 3,000 years, never ever. The only way India has been ruled and you can look at any empire you want, you can look at Ashoka the great, you can look at the Mauryas, you can look at the Guptas, you can look at anyone you want, It has always been ruled by conversation and negotiation," he said.

The other vision was a centralizing one, the idea of a king, which the Congress had removed at the time of Independence in 1947, the leader said.

"We smashed that idea of a king. Now that idea of king has come back, that there is a king, a Shahenshah, a ruler of rulers, a master of masters. Now, what is happening? Now, Speaker Sir, what is happening as a result of this flawed vision? What is happening, is that the instruments of the conversation between our states. The instruments of the conversation between our peoples, what we call the institutions of our country are being attacked and captured by one idea," he said.

Talking about Jammu and Kashmir, which became a Union Territory in 2019 and shares border with Pakistan, the Congress leader said the government was fiddling with something extremely dangerous and it demonstrated a complete lack of understanding of history.

"My understanding is that the RSS and the BJP are playing with the foundations of our country and they are weakening the foundations of our country," he said, adding, the country was completely isolated.

Attacking the Centre's foreign policy, Rahul said: "The single biggest strategic goal of India's foreign policy had been to keep Pakistan and China separate. This is fundamental for India and what you have done is, you have brought them together. Today, do not be under any illusion.Do not underestimate the force that is standing in front of us. Do not underestimate the power that stands in front of us, do not underestimate it. You have brought Pakistan and China together and this is the single biggest crime that you could commit against the people of India."

"I can see that China has a clear-cut plan. The foundations of their plan had been put in place in Doklam and in Ladakh. This is a very-very serious threat to the Indian nation. We have made huge strategic mistakes in Jammu and Kashmir and we have made a huge strategic mistake in our foreign policy," he said.

The Congress leader also targeted PM Modi over the alleged snooping by the government through the Pegasus software purchased from Israel.

The Wayanad MP made a passionate speech in which he also referred to the sacrifices made by the Nehru-Gandhi family members.

"My great grandfather (Jawaharlal Nehru) spent 15 years in jail, building this thing, my grandmother (Indira Gandhi) was shot 32 times and my father (Rajiv Gandhi) was blown into bits. So, I understand a little bit about what this country is. My blood has been sacrificed, not by me, by my great grandfather, by my grandmother, by my father for this country, so I understand what it is and you are fiddling with something very very dangerous and I am advising you to stop," he said.

Fiery Moitra locks horns with chair

Besides Rahul, the other notable opposition speaker was Trinamool Congress member Mahua Moitra, who made a fiery speech but was asked by BJP MP Rama Devi, who was in the Chair, to cut it down before her allotted 13 minutes were over.

"Mahua ji, thoda sa prem se boliye. Itna Gussa mat kariya. Ache se Boliye (Please speak softly, don't get angry," said the Chair.

The Chair then called on Kerala MP Mohammed Basheer to speak, despite Moitra arguing that she still had some

time left. Later, the TMC lawmaker protested by completing her speech outside the Lok Sabha in front of the media.

"And who is Chair to interrupt me, to lecture me on whether I should speak with gussa or pyar? None of your business madam. You can only correct me on rules. You are NOT the moral science teacher for Lok Sabha," a furious Moitra tweeted.

She further said that Opposition needed to come together to stop the ruling party from overriding the voices of Opposition MPs.

"I was asking only to complete my last paragraph to tell the Opposition this is why we have to come together. There are 200 seats, in which BJP with all its might have not been able to get more than 50. So, if Opposition comes together, this overriding of voices of people's representatives is over," Moitra said.

Speaking in the Lok Sabha, Moitra listed human rights violations during the past few years and noted that the US-based Freedom House Report had downgraded the country's status from free to partly free, placing India at 111th position out of 160 nations in the Human Freedom Index. She also mentioned that India was at an abysmal 142nd position out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index.

The TMC MP highlighted the yearlong farmers' agitation, the 'Bulli Deals' app in which Muslim women were being auctioned and the Pegasus spyware controversy.

"The government stands accused of having spent taxpayers' money to buy technology to spy for years on its own citizens," she said, adding "The government has misled even the Supreme Court."

Moitra also flagged the raids on opposition leaders ahead of elections, targeting of Muslims by Hindu fundamentalists and recent attacks on Christians by the same groups.

She lashed out at the Centre's attempts to alter the IAS cadre rules and said that the move aimed to "bully" bureaucrats in the states. Moitra claimed that the mention of freedom fighters in the President's address was mere "lip service". "Would Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose have approved of a Haridwar Dharma Sansad that issues blood-curdling calls for Muslim genocide," she said, adding, "Ours is a living constitution, it breathes as long as we are willing to breathe life into it. Otherwise, it is just a piece of paper, black and white, that can be smudged into shades of grey by any majoritarian government."

The TMC MP also accused the government of seeking to alter history.

When PM Modi responded to the Opposition attack in Parliament, he mostly targeted the Congress party.

The Congress had failed to secure people's mandate in several states for decades but was still indulging in "blind opposition", the PM said, adding that the statements and the actions of the opposition party suggested that it had resigned itself to staying out of power for 100 years.

Defending the opposition charge that alleged mishandling of the migrant crisis after the lockdown was announced due to pandemic in 2020, the PM accused the Congress of scaring them at the Mumbai railway station.

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In the Lok Sabha, TMC's Mahua Moitra listed human rights violations during the past few years and noted that the US-based Freedom House Report had downgraded the country's status from free to partly free, placing India at 111th position out of 160 nations in the Human Freedom Index. She mentioned that India was at an abysmal 142nd position out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index

Plight of common Burmese continues as junta rule lingers

Within a year since Feb 1, 2021 military coup, Myanmar has witnessed the killing of over 1,500 civilians including children and women across the country,. The military crackdown has also resulted in the arbitrary detention and arrest of over 12,000 people, writes **NAVA THAKURIA**

Myanamar (also known as Burma and Brahmadesh) continues to be under military rule for one year now. The south-east Asian nation has attracted international media attention since the February 1, 2021 military coup, but as usual for the wrong reasons. The poverty stricken country with nearly 60 million population of varied ethnicities started witnessing relentless public protests against the military junta. The government forces have responded to the public uprising with crackdowns compelling hundreds of thousands of villagers to leave their places and live in makeshift shelters with minor children who are still facing difficulties ranging from hunger to illness to safety and security.

Regular incidents of killing of protesters comprising the party workers of Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) along with other outfits, detention and arrests of anti-junta agitators including media persons, threat of lawsuits by the military personnel against the anti-Tatmadaw front-runners and other ways of harassing the common citizens (including the burning of villages) has become the order of the day in the Buddhist majority country.

Many prominent political leaders including the President U Win Myint (around 70 years old) and State Counsellor Suu Kyi (76) have been put behind bars. The pro-democracy icon has been punished by the military courts (where civilian courts have little relevance) with many years of imprisonment against unfounded corruption charges. More trials are probably waiting for Nobel peace laureate Suu Kyi, as the Min Aung Hlaing-led junta believes that she possesses the potential to emerge as their political enemy number one.

Suu Kyi, who still enjoys wide support bases among the common Burmese irrespective of their ethnicities, was earlier put under house arrest for almost 15 years by the Than Shwe-led military regime. She was released in 2010 and later the determined lady established her prominence with electoral politics and a semi-democratic regime was installed in Naypietaw, the new capital of Myanmar, even though she was barred from becoming the President following restrictions in the military drafted 2008 constitution.

Within the last 12 months, as claimed by various agitating groups, Myanmar witnessed the killing of over 1,500 civilians including children and women by the government forces across the country. The military crackdown has resulted in the arbitrary detention & arrest of over 12,000 individuals (nearly 9,000 remain in junta detention centres till date, where at least 290 died in detention seemingly after tortures).

More than 150,000 toddlers became homeless after fleeing their villages with ill-fated parents. Many of them left

Unconfirmed reports claim that nearly 2000 personnel belonging to Tatmadaw and their supporters (termed as army informers) also lost their lives during the offensive of People's Defence Forces (indicating the group of anti-junta armed agitators) in different localities. Incidents of armed clashes between security personnel and militant outfits also rising

for neighbouring countries like Thailand and India. It excludes another few hundreds of thousands of Rohingya children, who had to flee their native places after the Burmese military's crackdown before the Covid-19 (also the coup) hit the country and they mostly arrived in south Bangladesh.

Unconfirmed reports claim that nearly 2000 personnel belonging to Tatmadaw and their supporters (termed as army informers) also lost their lives during the offensive of People's Defence Forces (indicating the group of anti-junta armed agitators) in different localities. Incidents of armed clashes between security personnel and ethnic militant outfits also continue to grow with more intensity across the country.

The military personnel even launched indiscriminate aerial offensives and continued arson in the populous villages. They have targeted offices, hospitals, schools, prayer houses, etc forcing over 4,00,000 villagers to escape their native places. Most of the frightened

residents left their places with family members because of aerial attacks from military jets and helicopters in various places.

Even a Burmese national, later identified as Ko Aung Aung (20), self-immolated in Mandalay of central Myanmar on 1 February as the agitating people across the country observed a silence strike (deserting streets from 10 am to 4 pm) on the day protesting against the military rule. A sheet of paper, where it was written in Burmese as they cannot go back to the past, was recovered near to Aung, who set himself on fire in Kyaukpadaung town of Mandalay locality. Soon he succumbed to injuries in the hospital.

Lately, United Nations secretary-general Antonio Guterres commented that he stands in solidarity with the people of Myanmar and for a return to an inclusive, democratic society. The multiple vulnerabilities of all people across Myanmar and its regional implications require an urgent response, said Guterres adding that humanitarian access to people in need is critically important for the UN and partners to continue to deliver on the ground. Moreover, armed forces and all stakeholders must respect human rights and fundamentalfreedom, asserted the UN chief.

Earlier on 6 December 2021, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the recommendations made by the UN credentials committee to defer the decision on who would represent Myanmar at the UN. It dishonoured credentials of the Myanmar military regime and rejected the junta's appeal allowing U Kyaw Moe Tun, the current permanent representative of Myanmar, to continue representing the country at the influential global forum.

The Burmese generals, who grabbed the political power last year claiming fraudulence in November 2020 general elections (where Suu Kyi-led NLD emerged victorious and was about to resume new government functioning from 1 February just before it was ousted), initially declared emergency and then promised to bring back a multi-party democracy with fresh elections by 2023. Simultaneously, the generals tried to attain recognition from various powerful and democratic nations around the world.

On the ground, a National Unity Government (NUG), formed by the Parliamentarians (mostly NLD lawmakers) continues trying to garner public support and also assurance from the international community. Not to speak of other outside political forums, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has failed to support the unity government. Shockingly, the chair of ASEAN (Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen) even recently visited Myanmar and met with its dictator Min Aung Hlaing.

Hun Sen's official visit to Myanmar and his meeting with the Burmese dic-

tator attracted strong reactions from the pro-democracy forums in the region. Charles Santiago, chairman of ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), asserted that the 'joint statement released by Hun Sen with Min Aung Hlaing was a misguided and dangerous attempt to deceptively portray a breakthrough'. "It is a brazen attempt by these two coup leaders to hijack ASEAN for their own authoritarian purposes, undermining the Myanmar peoples' fight for democracy and human rights," added the Malaysian Parliamentarian.

Khin Ohmar, an exiled Burmese activist, pointed that Hun Sen 'should know better, having lived through the Khmer Rouge genocide, than to act as an accomplice to the Myanmar junta that is accused of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes'. Speaking to this writer from an undisclosed location recently, she questioned, "Has Hun Sen forgotten the millions of Cambodian people who suffered through their own genocide?"

The founder of Progressive Voice, a forum for democracy and equal rights to citizens, added that Hun Sen and the junta's attempt to deceive the world that they are making progress to resolve the situation is blatantly dishonest, and Myanmar people are not fooled by it. Hun Sen's hijacking of ASEAN through its chairmanship should not facilitate continuation of the junta's own killing fields against the people of Myanmar. Terming it as unacceptable, Ohmar insisted on revamping the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission, which is still functioning under the control of military generals. "Burma's junta continues to escalate violence as the military dictators desperately seek to gain control over the country. It is also imperative that various foreign governments and other bodies extend sanctions to cut the flow of resources to the junta so that the unarmed civilians can be protected from harassment," said Debbie Stothard, the founder of ALTSEAN-Burma, a network of organizations and individuals dedicated to working for human rights and democracy in ASEAN member states.

Speaking to this writer from a bordering Burmese town, Stothard also added that the NUG government and also concerned civil society groups are asking for sanctions on Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), which provides a sustained huge revenue to the junta and it has not yet been sanctioned by any country. She also informed that Canada, the US and UK recently enhanced sanctions and prior to them, Chevron (USA), Total Energies (France) and Woodside Petroleum (Australia) announced their divestment of operations in Burma.

Days back, the Women's League of Burma expressed concern over the arrest of Thin Thin Aung, one of its founder members, who also once raised multimedia organ Mizzima news along with her husband Soe Myint.

Some 120 journalists were also detained from different parts of Myanmar and over 40 are still behind bars. At least three Burmese journalists (photojournalist Ko Soe Naing, reporter Sai Win Aung and editor Pu Tui Dim) have lost lives because of the military atrocities

in the recent past, informed Mizzima editor Myint from a hideout. The anti-junta agitators, on various occasions, have been urging the international community to impose a complete arms embargo to the military rulers along with the restriction on aviation support to them. The pro-democracy activists also appealed to various democratic nations like Japan, Australia, India, Malaysia, South Korea, etc to cease financial trades with the Burmese junta. Some other nations like China and Thailand, who have invested in Myanmar oil and natural gas sector, are also approached by them to rethink their business interests with the junta.

Myanmar's powerful and democratic western neighbour has not made any strong comment against the junta except New Delhi recently made a statement saying that India is disturbed with the developments in Myanmar as well as the imprisonment of Suu Kyi. Meanwhile, thousands of Chin families from Myanmar crossed over to Mizoram in far-eastern part of India. Mizoram had already given shelters to over 60,000 Chin refugees in various hilly localities and the Aizawl administration has stepped up its urgent humanitarian assistance to those asylum seekers.

Alarming news also came for India (from inside Myanmar) that some north-eastern insurgent outfits (including PLA and ULFA) have joined hands with the Burmese government forces against the agitating natives. It is understood that the banned separatist north-eastern armed groups might have faced tremendous pressure from the Burmese militaries to stand against the pro-democracy Burmese nationals with an aim to sustain their hideouts inside the jungles of northern Myanmar. So New Delhi has a difficult issue to deal with the ongoing Myanmar troubles considering the nation's interest in the eastern front.

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COLUMN

FAR & WIDE

GOPAL MISRA

A New Delhi-based independent columnist offers an in-depth study. The views expressed are his own

Baloch rebels seek India's support as they scale up offensive against Pak army

The people of Balochistan oppose the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) alleging that China wants to build and raise its empire in Gwadar. They say that the Pakistani army is bringing demographic changes by shifting thousands of residents of Balochistan by force along the CPEC route to other places.

It perhaps, was the most appropriate time for the Baloch rebels, when the chief of the army staff, Qamar Javed Bajwa, was in Pentagon, and Imran Khan with his cabinet ministers in Beijing pleading for more funds to be used for the repression of Balochistan, to give a strong message to the Pakistani establishment.

The initial reports indicate that a number of helicopters, believed to be four, were downed and more than 100 army men were killed. Pakistan so far has confessed to only 12 casualties or so. Amjad Ayub Mirza, a London-based supporter of an independent Balochistan, has confirmed the downing of at least one helicopter and appealed to the democracy-loving people to thwart the ongoing exploitation of Balochistan by a mafia-type China-Pakistan nexus.

He has also dismissed the Pakistani allegation that India is behind the attacks which had taken place in Panjgur and Nushki in Balochistan province.

India, however, is blamed, maybe rightly, for abandoning the nationalists of the region. It is on record that the then Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru had turned down an offer by the "King" or Khan of Kalat, Mir Ahmadyar Khan to accede to India. It is intriguing if Nehru could accept two wings of Pakistan, why did he not accept, Balochistan and the present-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa , the land of the Frontier Gandhi, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, who never accepted Pakistan. As per his wishes, he was cremated in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, instead of being buried in a land under the occupation of the British proxy, Pakistan.

Meanwhile, the rebel leaders are keenly watching the political developments in Pakistan and hope that the removal of Imran Khan might get them relief. They remember that Maryam Nawaz during her visit to Balochistan had raised the human rights issue, especially regarding the graves of mass burials, the young men killed by the army, but it is not clear whether their exploitation would really end with the change of regime in Islamabad. The recently held lunch of the leaders of Pakistan's main opposition parties, Pakistan Muslim League-Noon (PML-N), Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and how democracy returns to Pakistan is being keenly observed by the pro-democracy people within the country as well as abroad. The high-profile luncheon, which included former President Asif Ali Zardari and his son, PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, with PML-N president Shehbaz Sharif and vice president Maryam Nawaz appears to have reinvigorated the Pakistan Democratic Movement

Similarly, Dr Allah Nazar Baloch, who is the founder and chief of Balochistan Liberation Front, has stated that the people of Balochistan oppose the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), because "China wants to build and raise its empire in Gwadar". According to him, "Balochistan is being targeted for more than 100 minerals. Pakistan has exploited and now is plundering gold, copper, uranium, copper, silver and other resources with the help of China". He further stated that the Pakistani army is bringing demographic changes by shifting thousands of

The rebel leaders are keenly watching the political developments in Pakistan hoping that the removal of Imran Khan might get them relief. They remember that Maryam Nawaz during her visit to Balochistan had raised the human rights issue.

residents of Balochistan by force along the CPEC route to other places. It is estimated that more than five lakh Chinese are being settled in Gwadar and three thousand acres of land is legislated and allocated to them. Thus, Balochistan has become a double colony as China has officially joined Pakistan to continue the occupation of the region.

The BLA Operations

The recent operations of the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), a joint front of various groups of freedom fighters, have revealed the prowess and strategies rarely found in guerrilla outfits. Their attacks, which had begun in the last week of January and continued till February 6, have stunned the defence experts across the continents. The strategy and operations have given strong message worldwide that they have obtained the necessary skills to engage a professional army.

The BLA operations resemble the functioning of well-trained armed forces. They could use the state-of-the art weapons and are well-versed in modern warfare. It is yet to be ascertained where they received such an intensive training, mostly given in defence institutes.

The, suspicion, however, is that the rebels have 'brotherly' support of the Afghan Talibans. They might have also outwitted the Pakistani spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), in winning a large section of the Afghan Talibans. The pro-Pakistani, Haqqani network, which controls Kabul and major cities, is considered a powerful group in the new Afghan government, but it appears irrelevant due to these aggressive operations. The people of Balochistan, however, remain apprehensive of a bigger joint operation of the Pakistani army under the direct supervision of the Peoples Liberation Army of China (PLA), especially after the recent visit of the Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan. They hope that under a democratic government, the problems of the region could be genuinely addressed, but much depends how the political developments take place in coming weeks.

The tensions in the region have further been stoked by the Chinese investments under Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, which according to the reports have never reached to the locals. The recent attacks took place a day before Khan left for the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing.

It appears that the China is also apprehensive of further investing in the region. It was indicated that most of the important functionaries did not meet Khan personally. He could have only virtual meeting with the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. Khan offered him a bouquet of concessions, including a new Special Economic Zones (SEZ), which will be exclusively earmarked for the Chinese investors.

Proximity with India

The people of Balochistan point out that India should also support them, because they belong to a larger cultural India. Also, the CPEC is being constructed violating the sovereign rights of India in the Pakistani-occupied Kashmir. The people of Kalat, Khuzdar and Mastung, mostly speak the Brahui language, which is a sister language of India's major languages such as Kannada, Malyalam and Tamil.

Josef Elfenbein, a linguist and historian only partially subscribes to the most common theory that the Brahui was part of a Dravidian migration into north-western India in the 3rd millennium BC, but unlike other Dravidians who migrated to the south, they remained in Sarawan and Jahlawan since before 2000 BC. According to another school of scholars, the Brahui-speaking people might have migrated to Balochistan from Central India after 1000 AD. In the Soviet Union during the 1930s, textbooks in the Balochi language based on the Latin script and newspapers in Balochi were published in Ashghabad and Mary, respectively. In the 1940s, the first literary Balochi works were published in Arabic before the India was partitioned. The 17th century rebellion against the Muhgal rulers in Delhi was led by the Brahui and Balochi tribes, who had set up the Kalat Khanate. It was only in 1839, when the Khanate rulers had allowed the British consulate and had signed an agreement under which Kalat had to guarantee the British troops safe passage to the borders of Afghanistan. Britain, in turn, pledged to guarantee the sovereignty of the Khanate and safety of the borders of the Balochi-populated territories, the present-day Balochistan.

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Channi as Cong's CM face: a safe bet or a gamble?

Congress MP Rahul Gandhi's announcement of Charanjit Singh Channi as the Congress' CM face for the February 20 state assembly polls is a move to effectively garner Dalit votes en bloc for his party. However, it is also being seen as a gamble which could backfire, reports **RAJESH MOUDGIL**

Crossing the rubicon, the Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has announced the three-time Dalit legislator Charanjit Singh Channi, who was hitherto seen as only a stopgap chief minister, as the party's CM face a few days ahead of assembly election in Punjab.

The move understandably aims at swinging 32% Dalit votes in Punjab, which is the highest in the country, en bloc in Congress' favour as well as cutting into the emerging Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP's) citadel in the Malwa region where the Congress sees a scope of ample improvement.

A few days ago, Channi was also asked by the party high command to contest from Bhadaur (reserved) seat in the Malwa belt which is beside his original seat Chamkaur Sahib (reserved) in district Rupnagar in Doaba region which has the biggest Dalit vote bank. This was, many poll observers agree, was the first indication of the party's faith in him for bigger responsibilities.

Chamkaur Sahib seat is Channi's home turf from where he has been a legislator three times in a row.

Punjab has 34 reserved seats. The Doaba region with 23 assembly seats including eight reserved seats, has a Scheduled Caste (SC) population ranging from 25% to 75%. The Malwa, which is the biggest region, has a total of 69 assembly seats, including 19 reserved constituencies, while the third region, Majha, has 25 seats including seven reserved seats.

By naming Channi as the CM face, the Congress high command also aims at countering AAP's posturing by projecting (Channi) as a leader who is from among the poor and the common people as he comes from a humble background.

By asking him to fight from the Bhadaur seat as well, earlier, aimed at using him to cut into AAP stronghold as well as to ensure the party did not want to lose him for bigger tasks if he failed to make it from Chamkaur Sahib seat.

Also, through him the Congress also aimed at the same time, checkmating the Shiromani Akali Dal's (SAD) which has an alliance with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) for the first time in the state.

And that is why Rahul made it a point to send a clear, loud and direct message at his February 6 virtual address in Ludhiana that he was told by party workers, leaders and candidates that people wanted a chief ministerial candidate who understood the plight of the poor.

He then elaborated upon Channi's humble background and his struggle in life and said that he (Channi) knew the problems the poor faced and also how can that be addressed. Hence the decision, he said.

Considered to be a mild-manner legislator and a stop-gap CM till recently, Channi has, but, been steady and focussed. Saddled in a new position, he did not wait and quickly got into action making numerous populist announcements during his 111-day stint and remaining in the spotlight and prominence among the Dalit population for being the state's first Dalit CM

Though Punjab's top leaders, namely, state party chief Navjot Singh Sidhu, a Jat Sikh and tall Hindu leader Sunil Jakhar promised wholehearted support to Channi in the upcoming elections, doubts remain about their future actions, especially of an ambitious Sidhu.

He rose from humble background

The political journey of Channi from hitherto an indistinct seat Chamkaur Sahib (reserved) has been slow, but steady. He was just one of the many detractors - led by firebrand Navjot Singh Sidhu - of former chief minister Capt Amarinder Singh till September last year when he was named by the Congress high command for the CM's post ahead of the state polls. This had come as a surprise amid bitter bickering in the party which led to the unceremonious exit of Capt Amarinder Singh from the post and the party.

Considered to be a mild-manner legislator and a stopgap chief minister till recently, Channi has, but, been steady and focussed. Saddled in a new position he did not wait and quickly got to action making numerous populist announcements during his 111-day stint and remaining in the spotlight and prominence among the Dalit population for being the state's first Dalit CM.

He also earned the party's confidence and support in adverse situations – security breach during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Punjab in January because of farmers' protest and also enforcement directorate raids at the premises of his nephew in connection with illegal sand business later last month.

Born in Bhajauli village near Kurali, Channi, 58, entered politics at a young age and became a councillor in 1992. He was elected as the president of the Kharar municipal council in 2003. Denied a ticket by Congress in 2007 assembly polls, he fought as an independent candidate and won. He won the next two polls and was also made a minister, besides leader of opposition (LoP) during the Parkash Singh Badal-led Akali-BJP government.

Move could boomrang

Even though it was seen as Congress' well-calculated move to field Channi as the face of the Dalit and the poor, political observers opined that it could also evoke counter-productive results.

Dr Ronki Ram, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Chair Professor in political science, Panjab University, agreed that choosing Channi as the CM face in the upcoming assembly polls has the potential to swing Dalits vote bank in Congress' favour.

Elaborating further, Dr Ronki Ram said that Channi's being a Scheduled Caste may motivate many of SC communities to rally behind the Congress party. ``The SCs in Punjab are not a homogeneous category. They are scattered into 39 castes, four mainstream religions and a large number of sects and faiths. That means, there is one larger, overarching SC identity, which is also an administrative and constitutional identity", he said.

Stating that there are many smaller SC identities within the larger SC identity, he said that all of these smaller SC identities are distinctively formed around their caste or religious ties and also influenced by varied ideological viewpoints as well as affiliated with different political parties".

It is in this context that the announcement by Rahul Gandhi of Charanjit Channi as the chief ministerial candidate of the Congress party is expected to forge unity among the varied SC sub-castes as far as their political bent of mind is concerned, he added.

To the question as to whether Channi's chief ministerial face will fetch SC votes or not from across all the 39 SC subcastes, Dr Ronki Ram opined that there is a common impression that it will lead to counter consolidation among the upper and dominant castes in Punjab against the expected SC vote consolidation.

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Forest beat guards CR Sori and Prince Darro show tree ferns found in Bacheli, Dantewada, along a perennial rivulet. *Photo by Deepanwita Gita Niyogi*

Conservation plan in place for rare tree ferns

The forest department, along with the Chhattisgarh biodiversity board, has chalked out a comprehensive strategy to protect dinosaur-era tree ferns in Dantewada, writes **DEEPANWITA GITA NIYOGI**

The Bailadila mountain range in Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh, which has the Bacheli and the Kirandul iron ore mine complexes of the National Mineral Development Corporation, is densely forested. In this region, the rare tree fern having a single erect trunk and belonging to the genus Alsophila is found.

Towards the end of last year, the forest department undertook a survey to count the number of tree ferns, along with the help of volunteers and state biodiversity board members. A set of recommendations has been prepared for 1,347 tree ferns found along the Gali nullah, a perennial rivulet. The area lies between iron ore deposit five and deposit 11 belonging to the mining giant.

The particular area in Bacheli where tree ferns are found gives the impression of a tropical rainforest where sunlight finds it hard to reach the ground. Experts and activists fear that with the continuance of mining pressure, the region's climate may alter, temperatures rise and tree ferns cease to exist as they need a moist condition to thrive.

Forest beat guards CR Sori and Prince Darro, who showed around the area, informed that counting of tree ferns was carried out over a decade ago as well. In 2008, a forest department survey had found 459 tree ferns in an area measuring 35 hectares.

Conserving tree ferns

Dantewada divisional forest officer Sundeep Balaga said a thorough exploration was carried out during which local youths visited the spot. The vegetation pattern around the nullah is unique. The entire Bacheli range is also a hotspot for bear, hyena, chital, wild boar and leopard.

"The survey was on for five days during which the height of the existing tree ferns measured ranging from three to seven feet. At present, a fenced boundary wall exists with a board declaring the presence of tree ferns. It is the only motorable road leading up to the spot. However, there are tree ferns along the entire nullah stretch both upstream and downstream, for a distance of up to 12 km," Balaga added.

With the intensification of mining operations in the area, forest is being cleared. Thus, it is of great concern. At present, six mine deposits are operational in Bacheli and Kirandul towns. The company has in total nine leases in its favour.

Tree ferns, also known as pteridophytes, are called living fossils and have a lengthy record of dating back to the Jurassic and Triassic periods. Retired professor of life sciences from Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University in Raipur ML Naik said he has come across tree ferns in Korba district and the Tulsi Dongri patch in Bastar. Tree ferns are also found in Panchmarhi, Madhya Pradesh.

Jai Narayan, who runs non-profit Vanya, based in Dantewada, said it is a good sign that volunteers with degrees in life sciences, botany and forestry were taken there by forest officials. But public awareness is needed. According to him, the area should be left intact. "It is of concern that day by day soil moisture is decreasing and ferns need a moist ground to stay alive. It may be of help if the area is more densely forested," he added.

Coming to the rescue

Dantewada resident Deepak Singh Thakur accompanied forest department officials as a volunteer during the survey held in October. Thakur helped the department by clicking photos of tree ferns and carrying out measurements.

Another volunteer, Manoj Kashyap, said a set trail already existed along which proper documentation of tree ferns took place. "Officials told us how to work as it is a sensitive area which cannot be visited every day. To protect the area, all activities should be banned in the vicinity of tree ferns."

Things look hopeful. A set of guidelines has been given to the forest department on how to conserve tree ferns in future. Their growth rate is extremely slow. In about 500 years, these ferns attain a height 8-10 feet. They also evolve over the years; while some ferns grow others do not.

The conservation plan for tree ferns includes protection of the entire catchment area of the nullah and monitoring its water quality at an interval of six months. This is important as water quality would have a direct impact on the roots of tree ferns.

The Gali nullah's flow slows down in summer and winter, but during monsoon it is full of water. Member secretary of Chhattisgarh biodiversity board Arun Kumar Pandey pointed out that water is the main factor in Bacheli, along with the climate, due to which tree ferns thrive here.

As a protection measure, water conservation work would be carried out to ensure adequate flow during lean seasons. "Fund has been set aside for this. A plan made earlier somehow failed to take off but now the biodiversity board would start work soon," Pandey said.

The total proposed expenditure would be worth Rs 322 lakh. Conservation measures include entry and exit gates for traversing, nature trail for research and study, conferring of biodiversity heritage status to tree ferns and a proposed lab for conservation of the germplasm of tree ferns.

On his part, Naik said though the forest department and the biodiversity board intend to conserve tree ferns, he is not sure how far they would succeed. He fears mining disturbance may impact their survival which depends on the local micro climate of the nullah. The rivulet is under pollution threat caused by mining waste. The forest area around the rivulet also faces pressure from local hunters.

Things look hopeful. A set of guidelines has been given to the forest department on how to conserve tree ferns in future. Their growth rate is extremely slow. In about 500 years, these ferns attain a height 8-10 feet

Community pressure also cannot be ruled out. People living in and around Bacheli enter forests for collection of minor forest produce and firewood. According to Rajesh Karma, the beat guard of Bacheli range, people cross the tree fern area to visit the weekly market. Even though the gate is there, it is kept open as rangers and department officials make visits for monitoring. The gate and the fence were set up around 2016-17.

"Villagers also take part in the annual hunting expedition locally called 'parad', held from March to June every year. For the past four-five years we have been telling them that tree fern is a rare species. But though some understand, most people do not. We are trying our best to ensure that they give up hunting," said Narayan.

Along with Vanya, the department is also trying to spread awareness at the local level. In future, some people may be engaged to act as tourist guides to visitors. "On our part, we urge locals not to cut down or harm the tree ferns in any way. They have been told to inform us in case they come across more tree ferns in the area," Karma said.

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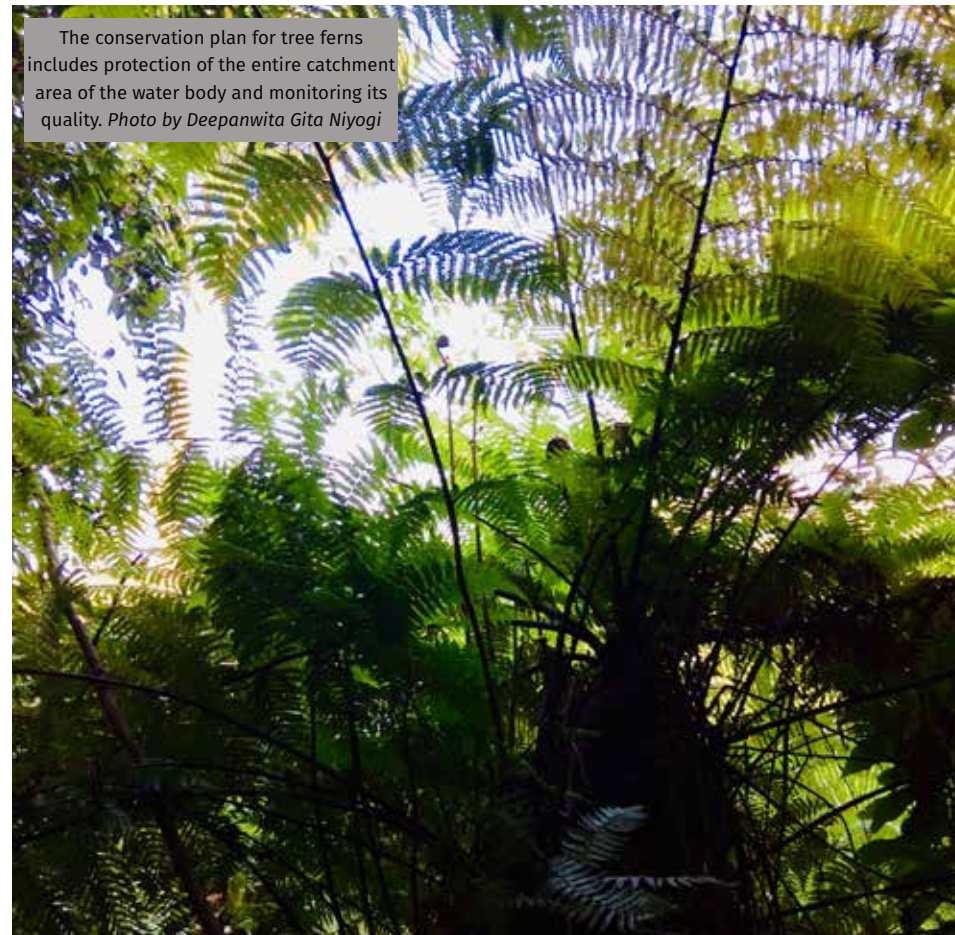

The conservation plan for tree ferns includes protection of the entire catchment area of the water body and monitoring its quality. *Photo by Deepanwita Gita Niyogi*

VANITYFAIR

• Deepika's fashion sense draws jeers

Actors of movie 'Gehraiyaan' including Deepika Padukone, Ananya Panday, Siddhant Chaturvedi and Dhairya Karwa are all busy promoting the movie ahead of its release on Amazon Prime Video. Recently, the leading ladies of the film, Deepika and Ananya were spotted promoting their film together and obliging paps with a photo session. However, it seems like Deepika and Ananya's choice of outfits did not go down too well with social media users, who ended up brutally trolling the divas, especially Deepika, for her fashion selection.

A video shared by celebrity photographer Viral Bhayani on Instagram showcases Deepika Padukone posing for the paps dressed in a denim bodysuit teamed with matching denim, low-waist joggers. "Didn't except this nonsnese dressing from Deepika my gorgeous babe," commented another. "Ye fashion icon hain India ke ... aisa trend Indian girls na hi follow kare to better hoga," a user sarcastically commented. "Ranveer Singh Ne Saari Bollywood Industry Ka Dresaing Sense kharab krke rakhdiya hai, Kuch B pehn rahe
hain yeh log aaj kal," wrote yet another user.

• Huma Qureshi is gung ho on her projects in 2022

2022 started with a bang for Huma Qureshi. She is all set to treat her fans with three releases in just one month. It starts with the psychological thriller series 'Mithya' which releases on February 18 on Zee5. Then we see Huma doing some high octane stunts in one of the most anticipated movies, 'Valamai,' opposite Tamil superstar Ajith. The film releases on February 24 in 4 different languages. And, before the month ends, Huma will be seen in a special appearance in this year's most awaited film - Gangubai Kathiawadi directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, which is slated to release on February 25. "2021 has been a special year for me, in terms of work and 2022 looks no different. I hope I get the same love from my fans," says Huma.

• EVE GIVES BIRTH, WELCOMES FIRST BABY WITH HUSBAND MAXIMILLION COOPER

Eve's a mom! The rapper and actress, 43, welcomed her first child, a son, with race car driver and entrepreneur husband Maximillion Cooper, 49, on Feb. 1. She shared the big news with her fans over a week later, by posting a precious photo of her baby boy on Instagram on Feb. 10. She also revealed her son's name is Wilde Wolf Fife Alexander Somers Cooper. Eve's newborn was all wrapped up in a blue blanket inside his crib in the photo. "Our Beautiful boy was born Feb 1st 2022 ," she wrote in her caption. The "Satisfaction" songstress added, "Words can't describe this feeling."

"LEARN TO BREAK FREE, NOT CAGE YOURSELF

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